

THE BROAD WALK

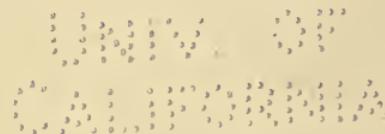


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THE BROAD WALK

BY

BARONESS LEONIE AMINOFF



LONDON
CONSTABLE & COMPANY LTD.
1912

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TO AN OLD HOUSE

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THE BROAD WALK

CHAPTER I

A VERY OLD STORY

ANTHONY told us he never really believed in the existence of his Russian cousins until he one day at Crayford Manor came upon some historical documents—family history in her prettiest form—the home letters of his great-great-grand aunt Sylvia.

Those dear letters stimulated both his curiosity and his affection.

To cut a long story short, he was not happy until he had found us out. He came, saw, conquered!

We seem, after barely a fortnight's acquaintance, to have known each other all our lives. And an Englishman too! A thoroughbred Englishman, our accepted type of restrained gentility, of perfect manners, and a coldness equal to the polar bear's swimming-tank up at Spitzbergen.

Never say you know a man until you have met him!

Of course, we have always heard of our distant connections in England. The extravagant Count, in a fit of family affection, visited the Manor House in the early forties. He was well received by Anthony's grandfather—compliments rolled between the two worthy gentlemen; however, they never repeated their efforts. The cordial relations between the cousins were dropped, not so much

by mutual consent as by a tacit understanding, that you cannot be neighbourly across the back of broad leagues. The distance and the trenches of Sebastopol clipped our grandparents' most excellent intentions.

It was left to a younger generation to find, and to bind, the dropped link in a chain of family history.

Nor could Anthony in all his search for romance have happened on a more prepossessing family.

We are all as sentimental as bees whispering to the first full-blown sprays of honeysuckle, 'Delighted to see you, dear cousin. Such a nice spring! May we borrow a little honey? Buzz—buzz—'

The bees are far more mercenary in their affection towards the honeysuckle than we in our devotion to our new cousin. We listen to and like him for his own sake—the honey pots of old Kent do not attract us.

'You must come and see your great-great-grandmother's home. It has not changed, it is just as she left it—an old manor in a sleepy garden.'

When Anthony puts it like that, uncle Dimitri invariably looks out the trains in an old Bradshaw, and uncle Hypothly tots up in his head the approximate expense of bringing us all to London—first class.

When you come to think about it, we ought to be deeply grateful for variety in human nature. Anthony might have been a morose young man—he is thirty next birthday, but he looks quite young—instead of a delightful companion; taciturn instead of witty; ugly instead of handsome; capricious instead of being easily pleased.

The fairies of old Kent treated cousin Anthony handsomely; between ourselves and the post he is an acquisition.

At Russja-Kaja he dropped at once into his proper place; he did not wriggle about and finally hitch on some-

how, all of a slant as some unfortunate people contrive to do, to everyone's inconvenience.

Do you not dislike a visitor who looks a visitor, who remains a visitor until the very last handshake ? Heaps of such plagues abroad—trying, very trying.

We made a pretty fair guess about Anthony before he arrived. He wrote to intimate his arrival at Russja-Kaja : a red-letter day in the life of the ancient post-bag. We all read his straightforward, manly letter, we all studied the features of his enclosed photograph. We liked him at once. A man who wrote such a letter, a man with such a profile, could not be far wrong. There is nothing like instinct.

We talked him over—our ardently expected and unknown cousin—in Countess Sylvia's own room. Her sitting-room seemed appropriate to the family council.

Our great-great-grandmother's portrait smiled approvingly at our interest in her great-great-grandnephew.

' I assure you,' said her beautiful picture, ' we Crayfords are delightful people.'

Uncle Hyppolyth was pounced upon and pumped dry as far as his personal reminiscences went about the delightful family.

It is an old-world story, sweet Sylvia Crayford's runaway match with Count Serge Daraskoff, a popular figure of Catherine the Great's Court. For nigh on a hundred years the little beauty has slept in our old churchyard, there, over the river, a step to the right of the village school.

Her marriage, to her descendants, is still fresh with romantic interest. We love to hear the story of the rumbling chaise and the forced stages of the married lovers 'twixt Havre and Petersburg.

A long cry that in the old days—when trains were not dreamed of, steamers uncalled for, roads as rutty as excavated

tions ; inns dear and far between, and the only thing, as far as we know, rich and pleasant the love which made these minor grievances as bearable as flashing gems.

Dear little girl-bride ; she was but eighteen when she set all London in a hubbub by her strong action. It requires strength of determination as well as love to show your doting parents a clean pair of heels and run into the heart of Tartary !

Tartary, in those far-off days, was untrodden land, a mystery, a terror, a book of Gulliver's tales, weird, horrid, untrue, credited by all who had never done the Grand Tour.

The squire of Crayford Manor, Sylvia's father, was an untravelled gentleman.

He shook and he shivered at his daughter's superlative impudence. He believed in the eternal ice, in the fierce wolves and the fiercer bears of Sylvia's adopted country. He saw her surrounded by 'illiterate savages,' cannibals for sure, given over to a religion of sorts vaguer and more distasteful than papistry, the excellent Squire Crayford's holy horror.

From all accounts, Sylvia's father was a typical country gentleman of his days, a hard-riding, hard-drinking sportsman mulishly Protestant.

No doubt the thought of his child turning papist, or worse, pinched his mind sorely. The Greek Church was untrodden ground to Mr. Charles Crayford, so much he knew for a dead certainty that Sylvia's white soul was in grievous peril.

He spoke up stoutly to his lady, blaming her for not keeping her daughter under better control, and causing her many a sleepless night when the east winds blew over the Kent marshes and rattled the house of fourteen gables.

We have a picture of the old house, painted from memory by Countess Sylvia—a fair artist and a very pious copyist.

She has successfully brought out the tangled light and the shade of the Manor House, practically overgrown with ivy. We catch a glimpse of black and white timber and many a low casement window, under the pointed eaves ; Sylvia has not forgotten the lilies of her day, nor a blooming rose climbing over the hall door, and she has kept the sweep of her silver gravel beautifully clean and free from weeds.

No doubt when she piously and devotedly painted her picture she put a touch more colour into the sky ; the surrounding trees may have been brighter—she has chosen a grand summer day for her effort—time may have faded the picture a trifle, robbed it of something which death cannot give and which life is always ready to hold out, the warm breath of reality.

To us the faded picture is brilliantly alive, instinct with art, and the brush which sweeps art aside—love.

No doubt about it, our great-great-grandmother Sylvia was greatly attached to her old home. In many of her letters (careful little girl, she kept the copies tightly shut up in her desk) she returns again and again to the charm of her old rooms. She recalls the deep window seats in the library, the wainscoted drawing-room, the ubiquitous ghost !

English country houses are looked upon as very gimcrack affairs without Mr. the ghost or Mrs. the Ghostee haunting a favoured chamber.

Catherine the Great is said to have received Count Serge Daraskoff's youthful bride very graciously. Anything European pleased her Mighty Mightiness ; and sweet Sylvia Crayford's behaviour, coupled with her forget-me-not blue eyes, pulled the scales down in her favour.

Catherine is reported to have sent an autograph letter away to the old Manor in Kent, ordering the squire and his wife to promptly forgive their erring and unrepentant

daughter. Lord Herbert undertook to personally deliver the Empress's characteristic letter.

Sylvia must have been forgiven. By the next courier we hear of her receiving from her parents a string of pearls, a flounce of Honiton, and a wordy homily, by some noted divine—wherein Sylvia was exhorted to keep true to the one and only religion.

Our great-great-grandmother loved pretty things. She had a pretty knack of thanking—her letters from this date onwards are far more unrestrained and girlishly bright.

Scattered over the octagonal room—Sylvia's own sitting-room—we still have her keepsakes : needlework pictures, silver ornaments, and delicious pieces of furniture.

Never tell me her father was answerable for the French furniture. If he had sent her a writing-table it would have been a solid piece of oak carving, and not a spindle-legged affair of shining satinwood, painted by Jourbet—the centre panel enriched by tulips—one mass of tiny drawers and ebony pillars—a most delightful piece of work.

In this very *escritoire* Sylvia kept her correspondence. Look, the pigeon-holes are still crowded—an orderly correspondence tied up in blue and green ribbon—did she do it herself, or did someone who came after her place the dear letters in chronological order ?

Portraits are rather disheartening. Looking up at the full-length picture of our great-great-grandmother she answers nothing—she only smiles.

Smiles across the little old room full of treasures.

'Read them all, dears,' she smiles, 'be sure to be very careful over my mother's letters—I did love them so—but do not ask questions.'

She says it smiling in happy confidence. She knows her descendants come of a good old honest stock—she can trust us.

I wonder if each courier to Petersburg brought her something ?

How she must have opened her parcels with feverish haste ! I rather fancy, at times, she could hug her loneliness pretty thoroughly. Russja-Kaja must have struck her as a big sprawling enough place after the cosy little Manor in Kent.

In her English home the big world was but a space away —news poured in through a chink in the high brick walls which surrounded the house of fourteen gables. The high-road, a stone's-throw down the twisting lane, the narrow lane where the hedges are so wondrous green.

If Sylvia wanted a change from the attractions her neighbours offered her, hunting parties and county dances, I am bound her father's chaise came round to the front door and carried her off to London, where she, 'the toast of five counties,' was bound to have had a monstrous fine time.

Would you not like to have seen her at the play, her yellow hair liberally powdered—what a shame !—her peach skin liberally painted—what a shame !—her ringing laugh waking up good King George dozing in the royal box. . . .

Sylvia, for all her spoiling, was a simple country girl. Very happily she seemed to have settled down at the Russja-Kaja. The babies kept her from yawning. She had a fine family, and her children, growing up around her, gave her plenty to do and plenty to write about.

With motherly pride she relates their different characteristics : she touches on matters of dress and gossip ; she sends her mother a recipe or two, to be copied into the Cookery Book—the squire's lady was a great housewife. . . . Turning the pages, written so long ago, we come across a felicitous speech—a joke or two—Sylvia was by no

means a fool—and oceans and oceans of love—pure, unadulterated love for home, husband, and children.

Clearly our great-great-grandmother never had reason to regret her youthful impetuosity. She lived to a ripe old age, and died surrounded by her affectionate children and grandchildren.

Count Serge predeceased her by a year or two. Just as well. He was a man to get into trouble if left by himself. He grew to be so dependent on his resourceful wife.

She died in the French bed, an heirloom at Russja-Kaja, a heavily carved, richly gilt bed with green brocade hangings, and a baldachin fashioned as an inverted shell, the seat of two dimpled cupids. A famous bed and much admired.

It stands, where it has always stood, in Countess Sylvia's own bedroom, widely flung folding-doors leaving it well on view, the last apartment in the file of reception-rooms.

All the brides of the family sleep in the French bed.

You may be sure Countess Sylvia sitting up in the great bed, supported by masses of pillows, gave her little fingers into the keeping of death with all her characteristic calmness and charm—her blue eyes shining in her blue-white face.

Our great-great-grandmother's death has always been accepted by her descendants as something superlatively fine.

Her grandson commemorated the event in an ornate poem inscribed with many a flourish and many a dash—
‘To our Angel in Heaven.’

The manuscript—I doubt if it ever got printed—lies in the top drawer of the Louis XV bureau in the saloon.

Many a time, especially in her young days, Sylvia ardently wished to pay her parents a visit. However, she never realised her wish—life is full of tiny stumbling-blocks.

Something always cropped up to prevent her carrying out her cherished plans. As to her parents, who also in their letters expressed their desire to see Sylvia's home, they are always putting off the journey—'waiting for a really favourable season, dear love.' . . .

One day the old squire, Sylvia's father, died and was buried. He was succeeded in his turn by his eldest son, and Sylvia's mother never again mentions in her correspondence a visit to Russja-Kaja. A timid, nervous lady, Sylvia's mother, of lamblike and harelke qualities—how she must have felt the going of her shepherd-squire !

I dare say a hundred years ago the posts were very uneven and very scarce ; Sylvia had plenty of time to commit to memory her last home letter before the next one arrived. (A murrain on our ancestress mother's memory, if she let a single occasion pass without sending off her promised epistle.)

I am sure if the mounted postman sounded his tuneful horn, galloping past the pillared mansion of the Daraskoffs, without stopping to take breath or rest—Countess Sylvia drowned her forget-me-not blue eyes in salt-washed tears, and turned away from the window, disconsolately tapping her high-heeled shoes.

She took an interest in clothes, did Sylvia. No doubt she wore her panniers and flowing skirts, her touch of rouge, her touch of powder for the edification of her husband, her babies, and the 'illiterate savages' with perfect dignity.

She held her little court in the heart of the country, well pleased to be excused attendance at the Royal Court. In spite of Catherine's graciousness, she did not care for her dissolute surroundings.

She went happily her own way, amongst her pots and pans, her roses and her children, leaving it to her husband to attend to matters of state. There is nothing like love

for inspiring trust. Sylvia was as free from jealousy as vanity—in very truth a flawless Kentish pippin !

She went about her work as happy as three blind mice at a banquet.

The Empress always had a knowing eye for a personal man. My great-great-grandfather was undoubtedly handsome. The Empress, by a side wind, informed her courtiers that she considered him ‘ beautiful as a marble god.’ The courtiers, vastly amused—slightly jealous of little Sylvia—prophesied that the god would soon wake up—no one gave a fig for Sylvia’s chances—‘ a tame little woman, not worth the snuff of a candle ’—again to quote Catherine.

By word and by glance his Imperial mistress gave the ‘ god ’ to understand what was expected of him.

Overcome by his future prospects, he asked and obtained leave of absence, and posted for all he was worth to Russja-Kaja, to be the first to inform his wife of his budding honours.

Sylvia nipped the news in the bud, receiving his information with cold disapproval, shedding not a tear on our great-great-grandfather’s travel-stained waistcoat.

Prudently she kept him at home.

Not that the gravity of the situation did not, at times, appal her. Both of them saw, on different occasions, a hangman’s rope, a mighty stone fitted to the nape of a drowning man—at best a handful of good dry shot. Not to return the Empress’s amorous glances was of course rank treason.

Sylvia fingered her husband’s pistols, pooh-poohed rashness, and wrote home in a cheerful vein—just to keep herself from fainting. For all her feminine qualities she had the true mettle of her sires.

Looking on her loving lord she decided to keep him for herself and flout Catherine.

Opportunity sidled up to the dear little woman, and gave her enemy into her hands.

It is good reading—how Sylvia got the better of Catherine the Great.

The Empress was a woman of quick resolutions and intrepid energy. Also she much preferred seeing things than having them told her. Hence her appetite for travel.

She never wearied in her house on wheels. She found it excellent going, when the odd structure was shifted on a sledge—she loved travelling by winter, preferably by night.

Here we have an old historian's description, *Mr. Coxe* by name, of that unique conveyance :

“ When the Emprefs travels she is drawn in a large machine like a room, which contains her bed, table, and other conveniences, where four perfons may fit to dinner. This machine in winter, is fet on a fledge, and drawn by 24 post horses. If any of them fail on the roads, others are ready to suply their place ; and there are feveral fmall palaces on the roads she travels, where she sometimes sleeps and refreshes herfelf. *Peter the Great* once travelled from Moscow to Peterburgh, 488 English miles, in 46 hours ; but it is easily performed in three days and a half. The Emprefs as she travels by night, as well as day, is conducted on by the light of fires, blazing on eminences by the road-fide. Thefe fires are great piles of wood, placed there for the purpofe ; and the road, where the country is open, is marked out by fir trees, planted on both fides, at the diftance of 20 yards from each other.”

One night, a freezing night in January, the Empress set out from her capital in her famous rocking-house. She always travelled at a gallop, sensible of no cold in her snug little home.

Many a bitter night the mounted gentlemen, holding aloft their flaming torches, froze to their post, or, falling

from their saddles, were left to die by the wayside. There was always fresh blood, young blood, warm blood, to serve an Empress who had mastered the trick of making herself both loved and feared.

Sometimes she would rub a dim little window-pane and look out on the night, observe a galloping horseman, and, if he pleased her, beckon him within. The Empress was traditionally broad-minded in her choice of companions.

The rollicking, galloping time they had in the close confines of that fetid house on runners ! If there was no room for anything else, I will be bound gold-necked champagne bottles winked from an ice cave, and delicacies of the table smelt encouragingly in some corner—more likely than not from under the Imperial bed ! Catherine was not squeamish, and, when pleased, never was a woman of louder humour. At times the swinging oil lamp, over the table, must have rocked to the sound of vulgar mirth—flying in the face of the Empress of all the Russias.

She did not often avail herself of ‘the palaces’—she loved to cover her kingdom, as fast as she could go, at one mad wild gallop.

She hated delay—the trembling teams of picked horses had to be unharnessed and harnessed with marvellous rapidity—or else there would be a bad time coming for someone. . . . A lurch . . . an oath . . . a shout—the Empress was under way again.

Galloping through the night.

It sounds like a fairy story, does it not ? Can you fancy those measureless roads, those crackling fires, those relays of men and horses, all waiting to honour one woman ?

The space they covered—most miraculous ! Fancy a rumbling clumsy rocking-house on a huge great sledge daring to compete with steam-power !

Catherine knew nothing of red lights on the road. She knew nothing of a sixty-horse-power machine flashing past with throbbing engines and not frightening an old pony grazing in a buttercup field.

The snow helped Catherine and her machine, where it would most certainly have baffled a snorting sixty-horse-power motor-car on rubber tyres. The snow gave her the victory over modern invention ; rolling, rocking, pitching, as a ship at sea, the queer conveyance took the downward hills.

Had the devil and all his legions blocked Catherine's path, through her silver speaking-tube she would have damned them for all they were worth, and driven clean over their pliable limbs.

Catherine loved the motion of her rocking-house, drawn by galloping horses, panting across her vast kingdom.

Sometimes when the moon casts strange shadows on the snow, I like to fancy that uncouth floundering carriage, ploughing up the silent avenue leading to the great house of Russja-Kaja. I seem to see it advance, at a grand dash, surrounded by flaming torches and grim horsemen powdered with icicles.

It was a bitter January night when Catherine honoured my great-great-grandfather with an unexpected visit.

She came as a thief in the night and she found them watching.

News of her coming had spread like wild-fire. The 'machine' was well known in grim Tartary. Little children cowed in awe at the thought of it, and its actual appearance set their elders' wits at extreme numbness. They would fall where they stood, on their knees, invoking the protection of the holy company of saints.

Catherine rarely regarded the peasantry one way or another. They were there, stock accessories in her trium-

phal progress, men of matted beards and stalwart forms—vermin for all that.

So she passed them by as flies on the road.

If they dared, by miserable accident, to cross her way, she drove them off, scattering man and beast into the ditches ; a patch of trampled snow showing where they had fallen. I warrant you never a curse or groan. Illiterate savages as they were—they knew their master.

A masterful woman, does she not rival Cæsar in all his glory ? A woman of resources and high intellect requires careful playing. . . .

And here we have Catherine, warm and contented, driving up to the front door of Russja-Kaja.

A smug smile on her brilliant face—a successful woman can never run far short of beauty. Catherine had her tender moments. For the nonce the cards were pushed in a dirty heap ; she preferred a seasoned pack, a pack with the dirty traces of luck. Superstitious and, in some things, a coward—our Empress.

The carriage halted. The floundering, sweating horses stumbled in the snow. The torches whirled to place, backing here, backing there—leaving room for her Imperial Majesty's exit.

Russja-Kaja in darkness. Only a twinkling light in the great hall window, and another upstairs—probably the nursery.

Catherine scanned the pillared mansion of the Daraskoffs and laughed, well pleased ; she rather liked taking her favourites by surprise. She caused them such consternation. She had the power to give them exquisite joy. She priced herself highly, did Catherine.

Sweet Sylvia, the daughter of Squire Crayford, dared to dare the Mistress of the World—a high-sounding style commendable to Catherine's inordinate vanity. She dared

to send her about her business, and like St. Elizabeth of old, saving the situation by a bouncing lie.

I wonder, if the Empress had forced her way into my grandfather's apartments, if the saints would have promptly pitted his excellent skin with gathering lumps ? We all know they turned St. Elizabeth's loaves into roses.

When that redoubtable carriage splashed up to the entrance door at Russja-Kaja, little Sylvia, 'in a hooped gown of blue brocade and silver lace,' stood on the lowest step to receive her august visitor.

She does not mention in her interesting letter home if she covered her neck with a tippet of fur—we can but hope it. Remember, a freezing night in January ; the stars washed in snow clouds until they were pale and invisible as faded snowdrops ; a dark night piercingly cold.

The horsemen, drawn up in a semicircle, held their flaming torches on high, and stared at the proud little figure.

With many a drooping curtsey, and many a lively regret, Countess Sylvia informed Catherine—standing, an imposing woman, in the doorway of her rocking-house—that Serge Sergejevitch lay sick of a fever. 'God defend it were not smallpox,' said Sylvia, piously casting her forget-me-not blue eyes heavenwards.

Catherine retreated, slamming the door of her rocking-house, shouting an oath, and speeding malediction on the pestilence and on the accursed place—in a fine temper, my lady.

The tired, floundering horses were whipped up again, the house on runners swayed heavily, took the corner badly, and lurched away down the great avenue, surrounded by the flare of smoking torches.

Sylvia stood upright at her post, on the steps of the

pillared mansion, until the last gleam of that swiftly moving cavalcade had been swallowed up in the heart of the forest.

She did not move until the last shout had died away—until the great courtyard, cleared of servants, lay wide and trampled in the darkness.

Then she ran swiftly upstairs, catching up her hooped petticoats of blue brocade, and as she ran she smiled, and, bending down, she drew out of her narrow pocket a key.

She unlocked her husband's double-barrelled door, and he, sitting in complete darkness, felt the rush of her skirts and heard the sound of her tears.

So like a woman—they never can keep it up ! I believe Sylvia was uncommonly close to hysterics, until her dear friend kissed them away.

At supper she was as gay as gay could be, laughing heartily and picking her food. You cannot eat when you are over-excited.

All these intimate and exciting details we can read in her next letter to Crayford Manor.

If the Empress saw through sweet Sylvia's fooling, she never reproached or approached my great-great-grandfather again. As good fish as he to be found any day in the sea ! If the tame little woman had successfully hooked him, well and good. I will be bound she flouted the idea of stale fish !

She liked her fish highly flavoured, glitteringly fresh, and, above all, panting to be caught !

How she juggled with her long line of favourites !

A masterful woman with an exceptional constitution.

Up in the loft, in a big oak chest, we still keep our great-great-grandmother's runaway dress. I rather imagine, when she embarked on the *Faversham Lass*, she must have startled the captain.

It is a very smart dress, miraculously small-waisted, trimmed with yellow pearl buttons—a petticoat of taffeta flounced with yellow lace. Besides the dress a duck of a bonnet, with narrow blue satin strings; a pair of tiny shoes and stockings—our Sylvia's feet were notably lovely. I think that is all, except a scarf of black satin painted with guelder-roses. Came later—surely a present from Squire Crayford?—such a good quality and so ugly.

Anthony has handled his great-great-aunt's wedding shoes; he has touched them gently, almost reverently—dear old mildewed shoes. . . .

Very likely the decks of the *Faversham Lass* were wet when Sylvia stepped aboard, with head held high and tremulous lips.

We know she was only a lion-hearted woman.

Anthony put back the little white slippers in their proper place, the left-hand corner of the great, sparsely furnished chest. As if we would crowd our great-great-grandmother's belongings!

We dropped the solid lid very lightly and covered up her finery.

Who knows—perhaps this very night ‘the marble god’ will return to earth, just a breath, a ghostly kiss on Sylvia’s bridal slippers?

‘Another night in paradise,’ said Anthony, looking down the Broad Walk bathed in the evening light.

The sun was setting over the river.

The old apple trees looked rosily young, and quite determined to bear fruit next year. This year they have failed. McArthur said it was to be expected. Why should we be expected to find consolation in a trial if it has only been sufficiently boomed beforehand? ‘I told you so,’ no, never, never—do not come to me with your old, stale,

travel-worn doctrines ! I will have none of them, besides, being an original little girl, to-night I am feeling extra specially happy.

And all comes from a fallen peony flower, a walk, a talk, and an opal cloud sailing the blue skies.

Well, first I and Anthony, or, to be polite, Anthony and I, lingered in the Broad Walk, admiring the peonies, though they were terribly over-blown. Some might call them vulgar. We did not.

A flower cannot be vulgar, nor a proper-spirited woman.

I and Anthony—Anthony and I—agree. We do agree.

We have never yet struck a subject—an icy subject—which has left a coolness between us. Luck, or fate—call it what you will.

Well, close to a pool of crimson leaves—the petals of a dejected peony—Anthony told me of his parents.

His father is dead. His mother lives in the house of fourteen gables, but when he, Anthony, marries, she is going to bless his bride and retire to the dower-house.

Squire Crayford, Sylvia's father, made a good investment. At the time his lady, of lamblike and harelake qualities, bleated sadly over his extravagance.

'The proof of the pudding is in the eating'; neither the squire nor his good lady tasted the dish they had put their money into. They left it for Anthony. The squire invested in London property, I do not know where exactly—Bloomsbury or Park Lane—anyhow, Anthony is 'rolling in money.'

I am so glad—though money is the root of all evil it is an excellent vegetable.

We did not talk of the London property; we talked of the old Manor garden.

Anthony showed me all round.

He explained the exact position of the bed of lilies, tucked

away under the postern gate, which is arched by a wistaria tree—a grand old tree, with a root as massive as the trunk of a coiled cobra.

He has shown me the inscription on the sundial ; we read it together by moonlight.

'Kiss in the morning, kiss at night,
Makes the day both charming and bright.'

We both laughed over the wag's retort, cut perhaps a century later in the grey stone.

'Kiss at noon,
None too soon,
If she's amiss,
Kiss another miss.'

Rather delicious, is it not ? Just imagine what a lot of people have scanned these lines, and no doubt taken their lesson to heart. Who wrote it ? Was it a mother's warning to a fractious nursery, or a wife's advice to her husband ?—forgetting rapidly. It might be either one or the other—or neither. Perhaps it is the work of a love-sick poet ? an Elizabethan poet, a friend of Spenser, thinking of his Faerie Queene.

I love the old garden—Anthony's garden.

Was there ever such a garden of roses, turf so green, hickory trees so tall, and a bog oak—large as a giant's tent—flung in a back corner, wasting its strength on the Rose Walk ?

The Rose Walk is entirely given over to the roses. It lies between two sheltering walls—it is a dream of a walk when all the roses are out together, looking up to the blue sky, faced with sunshine.

We revelled in the roses—in broad daylight. After a time we went back to the sweet-peas, and the pinks and the tall lavender bushes.

We wandered from one enclosed garden to the other. We smelt the strawberries, ruddy in the sun. We admired the green peas—coming on nicely. I fancy we tested the gooseberries—not quite ripe.

Then we wandered off again, over the big lawn, firm as a rock, through the wild garden, rather a wilderness this—the pond is inclined to be dry—more is the pity. We rested in the little shelter boastfully calling itself a ‘summer-house,’ only a seat for two, under a tiny roof, but beautifully painted and solid.

If your great-great-grandfather invested in London property it would be a sin and a shame if you kept tottering shelters and slovenly flower-beds—and weeds.

A sleek fat property, my cousin Anthony’s. Acres of well-timbered grounds, meadows as green as emeralds, where the fat sheep grow fatter, and the decorous villagers take their right of way as a matter of course.

Anthony noticed something had ruffled me. Silly Jane—the perfection of the Manor made her jealous. She imagined for one sad moment that Russja-Kaja might take affront and weep over her poverty.

Only an opal cloud sailing the flawless blue.

In a minute I was all right again—contented with our kingdom.

I will tell you a secret.

Russja-Kaja is an immense property, but she has her boundary. To the right, to the left—east, south, west, north, she is guarded by hedges of white perpetual roses—quite invisible, of course.

They shut out the kingdom of the world. If an unkind wind blows our way, it is always diluted by attar of roses.

True blue roses blooming for the chosen few—the very essence of happiness.

CHAPTER II

ON THE VERANDAH

'LET me, my dear Anthony,' said Anna Nicolajevna, 'introduce you to our nearest neighbours and our very dear friends.'

'I am delighted to meet you, sir,' said tante Sonja in her pretty formal English, extending her beautiful old hand for cousin Anthony's kiss.

He took it and shook it warmly. I am sure the sincerity of his smile atoned for his sad lack of manners.

Tante Sonja, after she had greeted us all, seated herself in her own particular basket-chair on the verandah, and alternately watched the lengthening shadows on the lawns and our new cousin's face. Tante Sonja and the Major are very old-fashioned people. For twenty years they have never left their home, Honeysweet, and their ideas are regulated by preconceived and accepted notions. For instance, all Englishmen wear check trousers and red whiskers and suffer from spleen. Frenchmen are witty, Germans ponderous, Poles crafty, and Finns obstinate. The history of the nations is most exquisitely reduced at Honeysweet, and, of course, the Major always agrees with his gentle wife ; he has never been known, in our memory, to have an opinion of his own.

We formed a circle round the tea-table, Anna Nicolajevna presiding over the samovar. The water hissed in the great brass urn, and a thin spiral column of steam rose pleasantly and disappeared in the rafters above.

It was a lovely midsummer evening. A wonderful light hung over the full-blown hedge of Scotch roses, white with bloom. The sun still lingered in the grove of statues, and over in the distance the forest glowed ; the sky was shifting and changing ; the sunset hour of all hours is blessed.

Anna Nicolajevna placed a generous supply of strawberry jam in Anthony's tea-glass.

'How do you drink it in Kent?' she asked.

'In cups with sugar and cream,' he said promptly.

'Does it not sound a horrible concoction!' said Fanny.

Sascha, who has travelled in England, and who stayed in London at a boarding-house near the British Museum, said in England the tea was undrinkable—black stuff, bitter as senna, poured straight out of a huge teapot into the cups.

'Not diluted!' exclaimed tante Katja, stopping her tatting needle ; 'how bad for the nerves. That is why the English children suffer from rickets—poor little things.'

'Not a drop,' said Sascha. 'At Mrs. Montmorency Jones' house the cream was thin, very thin, it suffered from the blues.'

Sascha rather fancies his English and very much so his natural wit ; it is laboured, but he thinks it flows as a bubbling spring in the wilderness.

Now he smiled and showed all his beautifully even yellow teeth. By artificial light his teeth look excellent ; by daylight they remind you of an elderly pony's.

Fanny glanced mischievously across at cousin Anthony.

'We will not go to England for our honeymoon,' she said.

'What with your blue milk and red meat and lead puddings, I do not feel tempted.'

'Fanny,' said Anthony, 'in your case it is quite immaterial. Young people on their honeymoon feed on love.'

'We will not be extravagant,' said Sascha. 'Our love is

to last a lifetime. Some people are apt to forget this, and to use up their store in a month—we will be very cautious.'

Fanny's delicate cheeks flushed. I do not think she quite approved of her lover's thrifty speech. Fanny is only nineteen, tall and fair and willowy, and she loves Sascha, and she admires him, and their wedding is to be three weeks from to-day, always supposing Cleo is to be depended on.

Cleo was snappish last night and the wedding dress material has not arrived, and one of her work-girls has finger-ache, and the cuckoo called thirteen times, twice over, this morning. I expect Sascha will have to nurse his impatience.

'I will not have a word said against English customs,' said Anna Nicolajevna holding out her hand for uncle Dimitri's glass. (He always drinks three glasses of tea.) 'Let their honest beef run red, let their nice puddings rival baked bricks, for all that they are a splendid nation. I love Dickens, and there is a modern man who writes in superlatives—what's his name, Dimitri ? Kipling—yes, he is splendid, quite splendid.'

'I have read about Kent,' said tante Sonja, 'the garden of England.'

'So ?' said Sascha.

'It must be lovely,' continued the Major's wife. 'A mass of orchards, cherry orchards. Were they in bloom when you left your home ?'

'The blossom was just coming on—the trees promised very well—yes, it is a pretty sight.'

'It must be charming, and your pretty and prosperous villages—they are prosperous, sir ?'

'Thank you,' said Anthony gravely ; 'they are doing remarkably well considering Lloyd George.'

'What is that ?' asked tante Katja ; 'is it a blight on the orchards ?'

‘ No, madam, on the country.’

‘ Ah ! ’ said tante Katja, completely mystified.

‘ For Heaven’s sake ! ’ called Anna Nicolajevna, from her seat at the head of the table, ‘ Hyppolyth Sergevitch, look at the clock ! Those terrible children are still up. Go to bed, Plaisir ; go to bed, Répos. Has not Anthony told you little girls of nine, in his country, are all asleep by eight o’clock ? It is past ten.’

‘ It is just striking,’ said the Major. As he spoke the big stable clock struck the hour.

‘ Mascha, Mascha,’ called someone, ‘ find the Nanna or take the twins to bed.’

‘ Is it not hopeless ! ’ said their mother. ‘ It has always been the same at Russja-Kaja, I know it.’

‘ Indeed,’ said Anthony.

‘ I am perfectly aware it is not the best thing in the world for children to sit up late, and to eat late supper. At three —do you remember, Hyppolyth ?—Olga would enjoy her steak and strong tea at ten o’clock. And very often, hours later, I would find her fast asleep under a drawing-room table—so natural, poor darling.’

‘ I am longing to see Olga,’ said Anthony.

‘ They are all charming, my married daughters. Vera has the same coloured hair as the twins.’

Anthony glanced at Plaisir’s mane of chestnut hair.

‘ Go to bed,’ said their mother again. ‘ Little girls in England have their hair brushed for half an hour every night.’

The twins giggled over the awful fate of the little English girls, and shook their magnificent tresses.

‘ It does seem a pity, though, to tear it ? ’ said Anna Nicolajevna reflectively. ‘ We keep their heads clean, of course ; but there has never been any brushing to speak of in my nursery. All the children have lovely hair.’

'Beautiful,' said Anthony, glancing at my black head.

'The child Jane is dark, so is Kasimir,' said uncle Dimitri.

'I am not a child,' I protested, looking up at our giant.

'Yes, you are—is she not small, Anthony?'

'The married ones are fine-looking girls; between ourselves, none of them need blush for their appearance, and that is a fine bit of praise when there are ten of them, three boys and seven girls—one died.'

'Olga is a little bit of a thing,' I interrupted. 'Cousin Anthony, she married at seventeen, and I am a good eighteen—'

'Pouff!' said uncle Dimitri, lighting his fourth cigarette. 'Always was precocious, at three years old (Have another cigarette, Anthony?) Olga enjoyed a meat supper every night of her life at ten o'clock. What can you expect of such a digestion?'

Uncle Hyppolyth and the Major formed a kind of body-guard round mother's chair.

'My friends,' she said gaily, 'you cannot get over facts; here I am at forty-four a grandmother, six times over. There is nothing like taking time by the forelock and doing your duty when you are young. Anthony knows my opinions. I wanted Olga to wait a year at least; her sisters both married at nineteen—but no, Paul Iljevitch would not hear reason. The most obstinate man I have ever come across. He adores Olga.'

'No wonder,' said the Major gallantly; 'supposing she resembles her mother?'

Anna Nicolajevna made a gesture of dissent. 'None of the children take after me—why, they are all as thin as maypoles. Fanny, did you remember your malt extract this morning?'

'Yes, mother.'

The forest was no longer a glow of colour. Night was coming on apace—the tranquil, luminous night of June which is so deceptive.

Anthony finished his tea and fished up the jam at the bottom of his glass and promptly swallowed it. He looked away towards the great park. Not a breath stirred.

‘Is it not heavenly?’ he said.

‘It is a lovely evening and very warm,’ agreed tante Sonja.

‘Very warm,’ echoed the Major, looking at his wife. He hangs upon her words and pays her least utterances the most exalted attention. Sometimes tante Sonja sighs at the Major’s meekness. It is not his nature to be meek, it is only his spirit which has suffered a cruel reverse, his spirit is broken. If a fly settled on his nose he would not have the heart to swish it away. It is such agony to tante Sonja.

She broke his spirit.

It must be a sore trial to go about with a crippled husband, especially if you know you are answerable for his misfortune. Every time the Major, looking at his wife, answers, ‘Just as you please, my dear,’ we seem to catch a glimpse of the empty show cupboards in the little anteroom at Honeysweet, and tacitly ignore the sad state of affairs.

‘When are the children arriving?’ asked the Major.

‘On Saturday—only four days left now and then they will all be here,’ answered Anna Nicolajevna, beaming with satisfaction. ‘Marussa, Vera, Olga, a couple of husbands and six babies—one is a new one, two months old to-day. Vera’s third. Alexis is in camp.’

(Alexis belongs to Marussa.)

Fanny rose and kissed Anna Nicolajevna’s hand, and curtseyed to tante Sonja and tante Katja. Sascha had been making signs to her for some time, he does not like his

evening walk curtailed. It is good for his digestion to take gentle exercise before going to bed. Arm in arm Fanny and Sascha disappeared down the Broad Walk.

Only last night Anthony, after listening for some time to Sascha's wearisome conversation, snapped the thread of his discourse by getting up and saying cheerily, 'All the luck in the world, dear fellow.'

Sascha frowned, and stroked his thin beard with his long thin fingers. He looked suspiciously at Anthony's twinkling blue eyes.

'There is no such thing as luck, my friend,' he said; 'hard work and unswerving attention to detail carry the day. Luck is the lodestar of poets and fools.'

'I quite agree with you,' said Anthony politely, but I think under his breath he whispered, 'Consummate ass.'

Now, seated between the two old ladies, Anthony looked at the lovers before resuming his interesting conversation.

'How charming,' said tante Sonja. 'I can imagine those great hop gardens so orderly and rich—the soil must be excellent. I have heard that in the picking season whole families assist in the gathering of the hops?'

'Certainly,' said Anthony; 'it is quite a picturesque sight, only sometimes the London pickers are rather a rough lot.'

'Do they come from London?' asked tante Sonja.

'Some do—from Whitechapel.'

Tante Sonja smiled. 'A suburb of London?'

'A district in the East End.'

She nodded her head. 'I know—what a pretty name, White Chapel. A garden city, sir, surely, with a beautiful white church in the centre of the green; I can see the place. And once a year the happy families make an excursion into the garden of England to gather your beautiful green hops.'

‘Jane,’ whispered Anthony in my ear.

‘Yes?’

‘I would like to kiss tante Sonja’s hand.’

‘Why don’t you?’

‘I have not the courage.’

Tante Katja folded up her tatting, thrust the needle through the ball of cotton, and placed them carefully in her red silk work-bag.

‘It is getting a little too dark,’ she explained, and almost leaned back in her chair. Tante Katja is the soul of deportment. She turned pleasantly to Anthony.

“McArthur is our fountain of knowledge,” she said. “He is English, you know, or rather Scotch, and he is very ready to talk about his country.”

‘I love McArthur,’ said Anthony. ‘We are the greatest friends.’

‘He looks up to you, Anthony,’ said I. ‘He has lived at Russja-Kaja forty years, but he is thoroughly British at heart.’

‘More than forty years,’ said uncle Hyppolyth, looking out on the misty garden.

‘He was the extravagant Count’s—the children’s grandfather—last extravagance. I can remember uncle Paul praising his young Scotch gardener.’

‘He must have been a boy in grandfather’s time.’

‘He was not very old. Yes, little Jane, even uncle Hyppolyth was not very old in those days.’ He sighed.

‘How the place was kept up! Do you see those fountains over there, Anthony? They were kept playing practically all day and night through the summer, and the whole of that lower part of the garden, leading into the grove of statues, showed the finest horticultural display in the government. I remember one year, the second year of young McArthur’s service, how the turf was bedded in with variegated

geraniums, interspersed with standard fuchsias and white roses. The effect was very good and pleased Paul Sergevitch.'

'I have heard so much of those days,' said tante Sonja, 'though I personally prefer a wild garden.'

She looked kindly at the silent moss-grown fountains, just discernible in the rank grass.

Just in front of the great verandah McArthur allows us a bed or two of plants and presently the nasturtiums will add a glow of colour to the creepers on the wall. Already Anna Nicolajevna's beloved roses are opening their buds. I expect our grandfather's garden must have been in very bad taste—ostentation is the correct word, I believe.

'What I like about him is his dignity. Jane, does your head-gardener sleep in his top-hat?' asked Anthony.

'It looks like it,' I laughed. 'He is awfully proud of his hat.'

'The dear old man,' said Anna Nicolajevna, who caught my remark. 'I don't know what he would do without it. He still believes it is the original one he bought at Glasgow fifty years ago. I would not contradict him for worlds.'

'So?' said uncle Dimitri, pricking up his ears. 'I have never doubted it, Anna Nicolajevna.'

Mother laughed gaily. 'But surely you remember twenty years ago—or perhaps it was before you came, I don't remember exactly. Anyhow, twenty years ago McArthur's hat looked very disreputable. How Serge and I' (a fleeting shadow over mother's face) 'put our brains together how to make McArthur accept a new one (he is a very proud man). However, one day he submitted to have his hat sent up to town to be brushed. "Wonderful how they do things," said Serge, "it will come back as good as new." "Yes, your Excellency," said the unbelieving McArthur, "I am no denying it would be the better for a clean."

"Just so," said Serge, and took possession of McArthur's treasure.'

Anna Nicolajevna stretched out her hands dramatically. 'It came back as good as new. McArthur was immensely impressed and stared at the maker's name before he accepted it as his own. There was the faded name all right, "James Saunders, Hatter, 39 High Street, Glasgow." Ah !' said Anna Nicolajevna, 'as a matter of fact the name was all that was left of the original, but to this day McArthur lives in blessed ignorance.'

Uncle Dimitri roared.

'So,' he said, 'two can play at that game ! Anna Nicolajevna, I would not have believed it of you—ha ! ha ! Why it is too good for words. You deserve what you get.' Tante Katja looked surreptitiously at mother, laughing until the tears gathered in her eyes. Then she put out a warning finger and touched uncle Dimitri's hand ; it brought his scattered senses together at once. Never did I see anyone look so shame-faced as uncle Dimitri. He covered his mouth with his hand.

At this moment uncle Hyppolyth, who had also been quietly laughing, coughed.

Instantly uncle Dimitri rose to his feet and faced uncle Hyppolyth, who coughed again out of pure nervousness.

'Jane,' said uncle Dimitri very solemnly, 'will you please tell your uncle Hyppolyth that it is getting damp ?'

Uncle Hyppolyth smiled at no one in particular. 'Jane,' he said, 'kindly tell your uncle Dimitri that I was just thinking the same thing.' He stepped obediently indoors.

Soon afterwards the Major's wife asked for her carriage.

CHAPTER III

HOW THE MAJOR'S WIFE LOST HER TEMPER

IT looks like putting the cart before the horse speaking of our neighbours' affairs, before telling you of ourselves. I apologise—yet when can we find a better opportunity to talk over the Major's story than this quiet, warm June night, when he and his dear wife are sedately driving home-wards, through as pretty a bit of forest land as can be found in Europe ? The occasion speaks for itself ; it would be a sin to disregard it.

Near the great house of Russja-Kaja the forest for all its fineness is but a trivial concern ; the giant trees come to an abrupt barrier, the sweeping barrier of cultivated fields. Very soon the Major's fat ponies will sight the open plains, and trot home in view of their own stables, just discernible in a patch of towering elms, between vast cornfields sloping away to right and left.

That slice of fenced-in property—which divides the good acres of Russja-Kaja and forms an effectual stumbling-block to many a scheme of drainage, and unity, and what not—is as a fly in the eye of our agent. Honeysweet—what a name ! He cannot abide the infernal hole. All the same, it is a pretty spot, and the little house, with its bright green roof and yellow walls, shines out between the fine elms bright as a new pin. The Major's wife is a lady of good taste and orderly habits ; if her rule stretched

as far as the pigsties each piggy-wiggy would have a bath each morning. The little garden, the Major's special care, is most beautifully kept, and the vegetables would get a prize anywhere, if they went in for competition. They do not. Our neighbours have a small fortune, besides the Major's pension, and having no children they are almost rich.

A nice old couple—the lady tall and thin as a wisp, with hollow cheeks and white hair, and, of course, the Frou-betskoi nose. That exalted family is unmistakable ; if you saw, by some weird chance, their noses lying detached, you would, if you happened to know any member of the family, spot them at once. The gentleman 'pays for his food,' as Mascha is fond of saying when her eyes feast on finely developed figures ; she loves fat people. The Major is short and rotund, with a fierce, burly, white moustache and fiery, bloodshot eyes—you know the type, a man who looks as if he would burst at an injudicious word, a man just full of raging tempers.

How looks belie one !

He is in reality the kindest, meekest, most silent man alive.

The Major and the Major's wife are often at Russja-Kaja. They enjoy us. She in her talkative manner—he in his silence. They have a wicker-basket carriage, and two stout ponies which the Major drives himself—generally at a walk. Up through the shady forest road—such a summer road !—we will see them advancing, with slow and measured tread. Maybe our neighbours have come to spend the day, maybe only to pay an evening call : in either case they first drive to the stables and walk up to the house. It is a habit. No one offers to take the fat ponies, and see that they are put up. The Major does that himself. He has been ordered to take walking exercise—

and the walk from the stables to the house is his constitutional. The Major's wife always enters by the front door, and leaves her wrap in the hall. The Major potters round the house. He loves to enter by a window ; he loves to tap-tap on a window-pane, peering into the room and playing a thief or a suspicious person. He loves to take us by surprise. We are invariably surprised—Anna Nicolajevna, tante Katja, the uncles, the children. He has a high old time before he steps from the terrace through the French window and catches the kindly eye of his liege lady.

The Major's wife rules the Major.

Thereby hangs a story.

To us, when we in our turn visit our neighbours, the poignancy of the story is always brought home when we pass through the ante-room leading into the saloon.

The ante-room, a small apartment, is lined with cupboards, shelved cupboards with plate-glass doors and deep sapphire velvet recesses. They are empty.

Glaringly empty, except for a solitary bowl of old Sèvres.

The bowl is cracked across and across. One side is utterly gone.

The Major's house is nicely furnished. It bears the stamp of an old home. The pictures of his forefathers—who bought the place from some noodle of a Daraskoff—look down from the dining-room walls.

The dining-room is such a cheerful room. Besides the pictures, the room is enhanced by the glow of silver, old silver candelabra, massive and solid, and fragile silver fruit and cake baskets, and a silver samovar quite good enough for the Empress's tea-table.

We often dine with the old couple. They are very hospitable.

The silver and the napery are lovely, the china and glass extraordinarily simple.

Thereby hangs The Story.

Some twenty years ago the Major had the reputation of possessing the finest collection of china and the worst temper in Russia—probably both exaggerations.

Anyhow, the china and the valuable old glass—early Venetian, early English, deeply cut and heavy as lead ; the wonderful rock-crystal bird, hewn out of one solid piece, whose twin brother, Anthony told us, was recently sold at Christie's for five thousand pounds—phew ! What a staggering sum ! The dessert service, the dinner service—old Saxe, old Sèvres ; china which had graced the Pompadours' lavish board ; plates handled by kings ; dishes which once upon a time contained the royal grapes of France and nectarines from Versailles—formed an admirable collection.

We never asked how, and by what strange fate, the bleu Sèvres Royale had wandered into the sapphire-lined show cases at a small place like Honeysweet. Fortune is full of vicissitude. Enough that the collection formed the staple glory of the little house painted yellow with a green roof.

The Major, who had inherited the collection, was intensely proud of his treasures.

He never passed through the ante-room without casting a proud glance into the deep recessed cupboards. Mind you, the Major's wife had but little share in her husband's treasures. She was there, the nominal head of his establishment, but in reality chief 'whipping boy,' if you follow me.

The Major's wife had to bear the brunt of the Major's infernal temper. She bore it meekly, astonishingly meekly, when one considers the Froubetskoi nose—she never

thwarted the Major. To all his outrageous demands she answered patiently, always agreeing. There are some tempers you have to agree with.

It pleased the Major to boast over his precious china and glass. At stated times, on solemn occasions, to honour special and important guests, it was removed from the comparative seclusion of the specially constructed show cupboards, and actually did duty on the Major's oval, mahogany dining-table.

The favoured guests ate their soup out of *vieux Saxe Royale*, they peeled their pears on *Madame de Pompadour's dessert service*, they could, right through the meal—the rather solemn meal—admire the rock-crystal bird, flanked by solid silver candelabra fitted with burning wax lights.

The company never quite threw off the restraint of dining under such pompous circumstances. They appreciated the honour done them, but they looked from the Major's red face to the Major's priceless collection, always in a terror that some untoward movement, some innocent speech might result in a grievous accident.

The Major's wife, who was given the full responsibility for breakages, naturally disliked these parties. Anna Nicolajevna tells us she sat in an agony all the time at the head of her husband's table.

She was always in an agony.

Even when the collection, by her own careful fingers, was restored to the safety of its own velvet-lined home—fresh incidents would crop up to set her nerves jingling-jangling as ill-tuned bells.

The least trifle—boom ! bang !—the Major exploded. He screamed, he roared, he made the place rock around him, he sent his servants flying—some actually fled without their wages or a shred of character.

The Major's wife, on pain of death, was never allowed to interfere in domestic arrangements. The Major bossed the show—in vulgar parlance. His wish was law.

His miserable, unbridled temper grew from bad to worse. He revelled in ungovernable and shocking language. He even swore at the geese.

One day Anna Nicolajevna, coming unexpectedly to pay a visit, found the lively couple—not that she (the Major's wife) was anything but a stone image, but her lively lord, scampering, jumping on the turf, and trying to kick an inoffensive gosling, which said awkward bird, instead of following his cackling, floundering, ungraceful elders, padding as fast as their splay-feet could carry them across the orchard, had maladroitly stuffed himself between the very legs of his irate master.

The master went for the miserable gosling. In another moment his life would not have been worth two pins. The Major, especially when his temper was roused, was a very strong man. Lord ! his cuffs—his blows—his kicks !

The Major's wife, sick with fear, flapped her petticoats in front of the gosling, which sent him flying—out of reach of the Major's square fingers working convulsively. She knelt on the grass. ‘Don't, please,’ she said.

‘I'll wring your neck, madam !’ said the Major.

At the crucial moment he caught sight of Anna Nicolajevna coming down the garden path, amidst the sweet-briers and the lavender bushes, leading by her hand Vera, her eldest daughter—a little, bold girl of three, dressed in a pink smock.

‘Naughty man—very naughty man,’ said the little, bold girl solemnly, contemplating the Major's trembling cheeks.

And he—so the story goes—looked her up and down, the little girl in pink, not nearly as tall as his lavender bushes—and roared.

' I loathe, I hate, I detest—geese ! '

He had meant to say 'children,' but he substituted 'geese' out of compliment to Anna Nicolajevna's frosty brown eyes. However, not such a feather in her cap. Goose is a very elastic term—one never can tell where it is going to fit. I expect it was a nasty backhander on the part of the intolerable Major.

Well, to cut a long story short.

The Major's wife had had her orders. A very distinguished guest was expected at Honeysweet. He might have been a Chancellor, an Emperor, or a man of the people, risen. The story does not tell.

A very select company was asked to meet him.

All arrangements were made and carried out under the watchful eye of the Major's wife.

The supper-table was laid out *à la Russe*—that is to say, heaped with the glittering collection : stacks of priceless plates ; serried rows of antique glass ; heavy candelabra ; fragile silver baskets, weighted by juicy hard fruit ; handfuls of nodding pink roses, blooming in matchless vases, on either side of the unique bird. They supposed him unique—they had never heard of the Twin, sold at Christie's for five thousand pounds.

The Major's wife had come down early to see that everything was in order ; standing now, with a lighted match in her hand, on the point of lighting up the candelabra, she smiled, well pleased with the beautiful effect of her table.

The dining-table, to match the dining-room, is not over large at Honeysweet. The company who sit down at small tables, scattered round the room, must have space to circulate.

The Major's wife was dressed for the party, and very well she looked. She paid for dressing. Her pale silk dress

set off her brown-grey hair, her pale face and her aristocratic carriage. Twenty years ago—though she was by no means an old woman—she looked old for her years. No wonder !

She was by nature a high-spirited woman, and she had kept herself down. She had trained herself to patience. ‘ Yes, my dear.’ ‘ As you will, my dear.’ ‘ Anything you please, my dear.’ ‘ With pleasure, my dear.’ ‘ I will go at once, my dear’—cannot you hear her answering the Major ?

And now he also came into the dining-room, very much got up—the fierce moustache, grizzly even then, waxed to a point ; the fiery eyes, with the electric light switched on. Something had upset the Major. Probably his shaving-water had not been warm enough, or perhaps a rat, scampering in the wainscoting, had stopped to give a ratty laugh ? Who knows ?

The Major’s wife dropped the lighted match and adroitly stamped on it. Standing on the other side of the exquisite supper-table, she trembled, and looked at her lord and master.

He must explode over something, so he caught at the first thing to hand, utterly forgetting his orders.

‘ How dare you, madam ! How dare you, madam ! ’ He waved his stodgy hand across the supper-table. The swinging lamp was lit ; a red shade concentrated the light on the extravagant table.

‘ On a common occasion like this—a trumpery occasion like this—to dare, to dare to fetch out my best china and glass ! It is infamous ! It is damnable ! You will suffer for it ! Don’t stand there, staring as a stuck pig ! Answer me, you white-faced—you * * *

And he stuttered and he swore, and he worked himself up to a pitch of frenzy. He stamped, and rushed round the exquisite table and roared :

' Rather than see my priceless china used on such a paltry occasion, ten thousand times rather would I see it broken, smashed, lying in a thousand pieces at my feet ! ' He stamped round the room again and faced his lady—blue-red in the face, and knuckled-up his podgy hands, ' Ten thousand times rather—ten thousand—'

He choked.

' You mean it ? '

' Do I ever say what I don't mean ? How dare you insult me ! How dare you answer me ! I mean it ! I swear by God I mean it ! Ha ! '

She looked him up and down, that fiery little terrier man.

' Then that is easily done,' she said.

Swish ! crack ! A horrible sound. . . .

The Major's wife had grasped the two corners of the lovely damask cloth and with superhuman strength she had pitched every article, the whole contents of the table, on the parquet floor.

Smash ! Bang ! Clatter ! . . .

The work was effectually done. The heavy silver candelabra bounced against the dishes of bleu Sèvres Royale. The apples twisted off the fragile stems of antique Venetian goblets. The bird, hewn of a single piece of rock-crystal, split open from beak to tail. The pile of plates smashed each other. The heavy salts fell on the top of the pink rose-bowl, and the bowl shivered at a touch. . . .

The grinding noise ceased.

The Major's wife left the dining-room. . . .

The guests were arriving. The first carriage was even then rolling up on the flagged court.

Terrified servants swept up the remains.

The Major stood with his mouth wide open—more like a round O than anything else—but he said no word. . . .

The second carriage drove up to the front door.

The Major woke up.

He looked round the scene of desolation. He picked up the fragments of a perfect dish.

‘Gad !’ he said. ‘What a fine woman !’

It is an old story by now. I doubt if it is ever quite out of the mind of the Major’s wife.

Women are the strangest creatures alive. Can you believe it ?—his wife regrets the Major’s evil temper. I believe she would love to see him blaze forth in good old style, using up a whole vocabulary of bad language at one sitting, spitting venom as a serpent.

He reminds one now rather of an upholstered man. His volcanic temper is all stuffed down his own throat, jammed down, as it were, by the eternal sight of that lamentable breakage.

He never got over it.

‘Just as you please, my dear.’ ‘I am certain you are quite right, my dear.’ ‘Anything you fancy, my dear’—cannot you hear the Major talking ?

Peace, like a great white bird, has descended on the little house.

And yet sometimes, sitting in the flower-spangled garden a warm summer evening, under the whispering elms, the Major’s wife will sigh.

She is not sighing over the Major’s broken china, she is sighing over the Major’s broken spirit.

On that momentous occasion, twenty years ago, the mainspring of his delight snapped, and he has never had the energy to mend it.

He lives in awe of his tall wife. He never forgets for one moment her Character. She has swamped him. He never has a mind to quarrel. He will never again start the silly

gosling's pampered descendants by whacking them unawares.

He has had his lesson.

Honeysweet is a placid little home.

Not even the terrible tales of two decades ago can ruffle the old lavender bushes.

CHAPTER IV

THE RUINED GARDEN

HOW glitteringly fresh is a summer morning after a proper shower-bath !

The scent of the rain-spangled roses dominated every flower in the garden, and floated up to my window on a breeze which was less powerful than a sigh, less fleeting than a smile.

The whole world smiled.

A cloudless blue met the green hills, seemed to touch the sweep of forest, in the distance ; hovered over the ruined pleasure-houses ; caught the youthful spirit of the green park, parading under century-old trees ; smoothed the river into a length of shining satin, a gleam of water just where the village showed, straggling house for house up the steep bank.

Even the grove of heathen statues caught the spirit of the morning. A splash of light laid Venus bare to admiration. The sunshine caught her face and held it too. Minerva, her *vis-à-vis*, showed her classic draperies to the best advantage, backed by the dense foliage of the grove ; a kindly branch hid the ruin of Minerva's face. She is badly chipped and broken.

Thirty years ago, they say, a storm hustled her, swept her clean off her feet. We put her up again—it took ten strong men to lift her. One of the strong men mended her

arms, but her nose was scattered to the four winds of heaven. A sorry tale of a goddess !

The rain has been bad for the new-mown hay, but heavenly for the dusty roads and the weedy tobacco plants.

Stragglers all of them—not much use except at nightfall. Pass by a packed bed of tobacco blooms when dusk is falling. Wait until the moon is up, showing as a pale white disk—if you require some convincing—and you will be surrounded with bewildering, intoxicating scents. You will want to bury your mouth in the heart of the waxen blooms and drink of their wealth.

There is a wealth of beauty in a garden at dusk ; in an old garden—a flower-laden, weed-grown garden, where Nature is head gardener. McArthur would be furious if he heard me. He is always battling with the weeds. He has no heart for ornamental work, but he approves of a tidy place.

At times he will look down the sombre grove of heathen statues, full of rank untidiness and an almost tropical vegetation, sighing for a kail-yard, the shadeless grounds of a modern villa reduced to Miss Dolly's garden.

Russja-Kaja is a big place.

I expect to-day will finish on a full programme. If the weather holds good, to-night, every bursting bud, every full-blown flower, scattered over the ten-acre garden, tumbling at the feet of giant gooseberry bushes, flanking a field of ripening strawberries, fencing a summer-house, climbing up the great house itself, peering over the croquet ground, watching the artificial lake, bordering paths, and hiding in the meadow-lawns—our lawns are beyond description uncouth—will give forth a bewildering, honey-laden scent. The flowers will welcome the cool night.

The bees will surely forget that business hours are over, and in spite of the dusk and the wing of night sailing over the west—her first feather touched with colour—they will dart out of their little green-houses and suck the starred sweetness of the Favourites ; circling across the bluebells and the fuchsia drops, they will dive home again, each to his own little house, standing side by side on the gravel path behind the great red currant bushes.

No one dares to properly weed the path for fear of getting stung.

McArthur considers that, taken collectively, our weeds would disgrace Zululand.

Why Zululand in particular ?

We none of us dare question McArthur when he puts the top-hat at a particular angle. It is a danger signal. McArthur is Scotch and he keeps himself down ; but, Lord a mercy, when he is up ! Like all quiet people, he has a temper of his own.

Besides, he is an institution.

And yet another ‘ besides ’—we are all very fond of him. I fancy, crushed down by the top-hat and his own sense of importance, he reciprocates our feelings. He is not the man to boast, and he is not the man to pay you compliments, but he is the man to trust.

The extravagant Count, with his usual happy-go-lucky judgment, must have detected this potent quality in McArthur when he was but a raw lad, so to speak, fresh from his ‘ Latiny school,’ chockful of learning and no experience to speak of.

He was taken on trust forty years ago.

McArthur has never failed the family.

Probably he looks upon us as foreigners and strangers—a length of a crag below old Scotland—but he is faithful.

In spite of the vicissitudes of fortune he is faithful.

No doubt to a grave and critical mind our grandfather the extravagant Count, fooled pretty well through life, and wasted his gold when he ought to have saved his pence.

We never know where our spirit-folk hide—and, if my much-talked-of grandfather—there is nothing like a liberal fellow for setting tongues wagging—is at the present moment discreetly smiling over my shoulder, I will give him ghostly satisfaction at once.

"Dear grandfather, we never criticise you ! When was a Daraskoff critical ? Never ! '

The extravagant Count died years before I was born, years before Anna Nicolajevna and his only son came to reign in his place.

The cheese was pretty well scraped by that time. The son of an extravagant father is obliged to look to his cheque-book.

The young people had to pinch and screw. Rather a ragged heritage—a great big house, a great big place, and nothing but inherited good tempers to keep it up on. Some tempers will not stand the strain, they just smash up completely.

However, my father and mother have never looked back—they have always looked forward.

Comparisons are proverbially odious. Only McArthur now and again indulges in the luxury of a 'talk.'

Between ourselves, he takes a 'dour pleasure' in remembering the glory of old times.

Forty odd years ago money was plentiful on the estate, and the extravagant Count did his excellent best to worthily uphold his title.

He spent a little fortune on Italian statuary, the year the young and promising McArthur entered his service ; he increased his private theatrical company, he enlarged his theatre, he was most particular about his leading dancer.

he added an outlying farm to his already immense property, and, incidentally, increased his live stock by one hundred and fifty souls.

He took a stupendous interest in his grounds, abetted and aided by the promising McArthur, as keen as anything on improvements.

They stocked the great park with additional summer-houses. They built towers and cottages, pagodas and temples pell-mell amidst the tortuous paths which traverse the park in all directions.

Nothing pleased my grandfather better than to lead a young and charming guest along one of these immaculately kept paths, and to watch her face when introduced to yet another 'surprise.'

He loved to construct these whimsical little pleasure-houses, survivals of eighteenth-century taste. Alas ! he built them for show and not for durability. The little buildings are to-day sadly out of order. Decades of snow and rain have worked havoc with their pretty faces, washed the paint off their sun-blistered cheeks ; and as to the winds and gales, they have not been more tender in their treatment.

In fact, when the autumn storms are pleased to play at spelekins with our grandfather's cherished toys, we just hate it. It seems such intrusion into our family affairs.

We cling to tradition. Tradition is the only piece of wealth left to Russja-Kaja. Tradition will not mend the ruined summer-houses, more is the pity ; tradition prevents our razing them to the ground.

And the winds play around them, the birds build in their broken eaves. The whispering echoes of other, brighter days sweep in through the unhinged doors, the wide-open windows, the many chinks in their crumbling walls.

And we leave them, in all confidence, to the guardian

trees of the great park—the fine old trees with their spreading branches—the pride of Russja-Kaja.

Who minds the weedy paths, the unkempt statues, the decayed pleasure-houses when the summer sun is shining on the verdant green—when the river shows clear as crystal, banked by yellow iris ?

On the tidal wave of our grandfather's prosperity came the deluge. Like all spendthrifts, he was entirely unprepared for catastrophe. Never did a house of cards tumble about the ears of a confident player with greater suddenness than the actual liberation of the serfs took the easy-going, elegant Count.

His chief regret was that his wife could not share with him his misfortune, or at least, by her gentle presence, console him for the iniquity of a headstrong Government and an autocratic ruler.

Alas ! the gentle lady—a proverbial down cushion—had in all gentleness died some six or seven years previous to this vast calamity. When money vanishes extravagance has to fly. Sometimes, by luck, it flies into the credit shop, and someone else has to pay.

Every shop was closed to the extravagant Count. All his friends and relatives found themselves in exactly his predicament. Honest money was diverged into meaner channels—life loomed for Russian hereditary landowners, exceeding dark, shadowed by ever-increasing financial difficulties.

Socialism opened its kitten eyes—just a wee, winking peep. (By now it is a full-grown, flourishing cat—great yellow eyes glaring in the dark, ready to spot the nobles.)

O shade of iniquity !

My grandfather was obliged to face the crash, as best he could, alone.

His only child, my father, was at the time a boy of ten,

and at that stage of his existence frankly selfish. He did not tax his brain over problems which never reached his mind. He might have gaped a bit, but he never worried.

The great establishment was broken up.

The dancers danced to other fields. The private band—now a free band—fiddled to less critical audiences for chance-money. Everything was chopped and changed about, meted out or ruled out—a topsy-turvy system of labour introduced—you could not call your soul your own. Each man, born and bred on the soil, was at liberty to pack his bundle and go his own way.

The freed serfs obeyed the letter of the law. Through the vast country a wave, rather of fear than of elation, swept the lower classes. Reforms are ever looked upon with suspicion even by those who presumably benefit by them.

The miracle of freedom struck the bondmen as of infinitely less value than the security of their former state. Were they not fed and clothed, and kicked and praised according to the humour of the master ? Even if they had to work for nothing, they were housed on the same terms ; the education of their children was reduced to exquisite simplicity—obedience was the sole lesson exacted with anything like severity. The old days had their sharp corners—but, Lord ! the fat, soft places in between,—the years of indulgence, if luck favoured you with an easy-going owner.

The serfs of Russja-Kaja had undoubtedly an easy time of it. According to McArthur, they lived on the fat of the land, and their chief concern was not to tumble over each other's feet. The great house, the great gardens, the wide acres beyond were pretty well overstocked. A labourer to a beast, and a footman to a chair—that was about the order of the thing—when Reform wedged her way through the sleepy crowd. The serfs, to a man, whimpered as whipped

hounds when their good fortune was made known to them.

As to my poor, spoilt grandfather, the very first time he could not lay hands on a thousand-rouble note he had a fit of apoplexy and expired before he could give orders to his agent to cut down all the timber.

Distinctly fortunate for my father.

During his long minority the rickety property had time to right itself. Thanks to scrupulous management and rigorous economy, when he took over his estates, on attaining his majority, the old place had not only weathered the storm, but was prepared to furnish him with a small revenue.

On the strength of these pleasing prospects my father pleased himself, married young, and took his wife to help him to rule over Russja-Kaja.

They started their reign with tremendous earnestness. They brought a fine exchequer between them—in very equal shares, both had youth, health, and an infinite capacity for enjoying life ; both were more than common handsome and their birth was of equal distinction.

Our mother was born a Princess Orloff-Patshin. The impoverished Prince—her father—could not give her anything more substantial on her marriage than his cordial assent. Her brothers and sisters blessed her, and her mother gave her a handsome share of the available family jewels. A great many had been sold at the time of the crash.

Jewels or no jewels, Anna Nicolajevna's glorious eyes have always been worth the price of a diamond mine. My father did not do badly.

During his ten years' minority the house was practically deserted, and the pleasure grounds left to their own sweet fancy. Nature made assiduous attacks on ornamental

work ; she flung up a bank of weeds at the very feet of the ancient gods and goddesses—much to their displeasure.

I rather suspect those desolate years must have seemed an eternity to Russja-Kaja. Spoil a child, and then fling him into a coal-cellar, and he is bound to feel the difference in a greater degree than a poor mite who is used to a half-toned existence.

Russja-Kaja, pitched into outer darkness from the flaming glory of the extravagant Count's brilliant regime, must have sighed and moaned over her treatment.

The desolate years must have lain heavily on the chest of ringing laughter, the dancing, extravagant spirit of former times—so near and yet so far. Silence, like a forlorn lady, searched through the empty, forsaken rooms ; silence tapped at the shuttered windows ; silence walked in the presence of the ill-used gods and goddesses.

Every dismal year the weeds grew taller, the fungi more remarkable. As McArthur says, a weed is a powerful creature.

Surely on that blessed June morning, twenty-five years ago, when the young Count brought his beautiful bride home, Russja-Kaja must have gone mad with delight.

The very river must have gushed with pleasure, the tame deer leaped for joy, the ever-faithful wild-flowers trembled with happiness.

Surely the heathen statues, at their first convenience, must have jumped from their moss-covered pedestals, utterly oblivious of their weather-beaten faces, and danced together in pagan delight ?

Surely a very living ecstasy must have swept over the land—one sustained note of triumph coming alike from bell-lipped flowers, young children, and singing birds.

'The old house has taken up her broken record. We will be loved and admired and looked after again.'

My father and mother have always had the greatest wish to satisfy everyone. Not having any money, they gave their people the love of their hearts.

They managed, from the first, to keep up an establishment of sorts. The extravagant Count would have marvelled at such rigorous economy, and wondered how it was practised. The want of money has never made itself apparent at Russja-Kaja—it is kept in the background together with the threadbare linen sheets. The threadbare linen sheets—all woven at home—are beautifully soft to lie upon. Anna Nicolajevna has made an art of poverty.

Even if Casimir, our eldest brother, now in the Page Corps, marries an heiress, or discovers a tin mine under the artificial lake—which is slowly drying out—I doubt if his wealth will make an equally good appearance as our mother's genuine management. The secret of good management is to let things glide, to take things peacefully and to thank God for everything. There is art for you, subtle, intense, marvellous!

Anna Nicolajevna is nothing short of a genius, considering her purse and her children.

Ten years ago our dear father—hardly more than a boy—met with his death when gallantly taking a fence on a new horse.

My mother bore the blow with religious fortitude. 'God's will be done,' she said, and kissed the youngest boy, Jacques.

She was left a young widow with eight children and the hope of an increase in her family.

She also had many friends. All her children loved her; all her servants adored her. Mother has never been really poor.

The hope of an increase turned out providentially well. Mother finished up with twins. She called her girls Plaisir and Répos.

I was called Jane, after an English writer. Fanny, who comes next to me in age, and who is to be married next month to Sascha Wredel, was named after a certain Frances Burney, also an English literary lady.

Roughly speaking, there is about a year between us all, except the twins, who came after five years.

When Fanny and I were born, Anna Nicolajevna was going through a systematic course of English reading. She reads novels by preference.

However, as she tells us, on reaching the works of Charlotte Brontë she pined for something lighter, and began studying the French school. All the younger children have French names.

Poor little Charlotte died shortly after her christening, which may account for mother's gloomy views on English literature.

My three married sisters have simple Russian names ; they are called respectively Vera, Marussa, and Olga. At the time of their birth Anna Nicolajevna was chiefly interested in farming. Russja-Kaja has always been as an open story-book to our mother. Sometimes the first page of a story can be more interesting than the last. Farming, after a certain time, gets depressing.

Three boys followed the elder girls—five little girls all in a row and then, the Son ! He deserves a capital all to himself. In plain life he is just Casimir. He was followed in his turn by Leon, who is now a middy, and who hopes that he may be an admiral one day and have the good fortune to exterminate the Japanese.

Little Jacques, the youngest hope—you ought never to bet on girls—is still in the schoolroom tyrannising the twins.

They do not mind as long as he will condescend to play with them.

I hope I have not forgotten a single member of the family.

Of course, I have still to introduce uncle Dimitri and uncle Hyppolyth, and dear tante Katja ; but they really must wait and sort themselves presently, or you will get giddy with so many introductions.

There is no doubt about it, we are a large family. We are also a very happy family.

Anna Nicolajevna is a fine woman and a great lady. She has a noble presence, something of a waist, and an imposing stature. She carries her eighteen stone with regal assurance and the buoyancy of youth. For all working purposes she is younger than Fanny. Fanny is old at nineteen ; Anna Nicolajevna is a baby at forty-four. She has the simplicity of a great heart and unimpeachable birth.

Her complexion is perfect. Her hair the next best thing. Some swear by her hair and put her complexion second—please yourself. Her manners leave nothing to be desired. She is equally pleasant to the village pope as to Vera's diplomatic husband, who is inclined to fancy himself—all diplomats do.

She shines at the head of her household, not only in her capacity as a hostess, a mother, and a friend, but also by her vivid dressing.

'Show me her clothes and I will explain the woman.' One of the Diplomat's felicitous speeches.

I do not know exactly how to explain mother's clothes—if her character matches them she is bright all through. She has not a sober instinct for colour, having borrowed it from a tropical bird who revels in patchy effects. It is a matter not of supreme indifference, but rather of gratification to Anna Nicolajevna if her skirt is crimson, her bodice striped

green and yellow, and the ribbon in her bonnie brown hair flaming magenta.

My married sisters are sometimes distracted at mother's dresses, but they always immensely admire her appearance.

No one, watching Anna Nicolajevna cross the parquet floor of the great saloon, would ever consider that her home-spun, home-made, old-fashioned dress was not adequate to her position as mistress of Russja-Kaja.

A grand air can successfully carry off a Joseph's coat, even if it only reaches the knees of the lady.

Mother's dresses are never excessively short.

CHAPTER V

THE ARRIVAL AND TWO ENEMIES :

OUR mother is the soul of hospitality.

She is never so happy as when all her spare rooms are occupied, and when an unexpected guest has to put up either with a sofa or a shake-down on the floor.

And Russja-Kaja throbs with old-world delight.

True, we are obliged practically to shut off a whole wing of the house. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Dear Mascha's hands sinfully refuse to do the work of twenty 'weemen,' young and strong, told off to do the house-work in the extravagant Count's days.

'St. Nicholas be praised,' says Mascha—formerly one of the twenty, with a foxy look in her dear old eyes. She does not care for the grapes of forty years ago ! She is a wiry old dear, Mascha, and manages her work on next to nothing.

The married sisters invariably spend two or three months at home every year. They make a point of fitting in June, July, and August—in fact, the pick of the year. Sometimes they are unavoidably prevented carrying out their plans.

It may be another baby, who has most selfishly timed its arrival, or waiting, or sudden illness which causes so much heart-burning at Russja-Kaja.

The married sisters and their families are very popular all round. Even McArthur smiles when June puts in a pleasant face—a nicely washed, smiling face. He cannot

'do' without rain. Like everyone else McArthur is under-staffed. He has not the time to run about and carry out Nature's work. A long drought and McArthur's face is a study in—vinegar.

Marussa, who married her second cousin, Prince Paul Orloff-Patshin, has been appointed lady-in-waiting to a Grand Duchess. Sometimes the Grand Duchess is troublesome and keeps her tied to her duties, just when the home roses are calling her with sickening insistence.

We are all mad about it.

Poor dear Marussa complains and explains, keeping the wires pretty busy, and handicaps fate by sending on her babies and her luggage. We put up with the hostages of fortune, knowing that eventually Marussa will arrive, perhaps with the late strawberries or the very early melons.

Whatever the man in the street may say to the contrary, a courtier is not a free agent. An official compliment is often a trial.

Blessed is he who keeps down below. Yet there is nothing so riling as insignificance—I give it up.

Anna Nicolajevna never does. She gets furious when Marussa's Grand Duchess behaves badly. At heart loyal to the throne, she will uphold the doctrines of socialism with all the fiery ardour of ignorance—much to uncle Dimitri's disgust. Their disputes range over wide grounds. Anna Nicolajevna grows flippant when she realises that her tenets are unstable.

'You are a disgrace to your order, a disgrace to womanhood!' Uncle Dimitri covers his victory with thundering good fire. Her flippancy saves Anna Nicolajevna a roasting. Besides, in his heart, uncle Dimitri has never contradicted a woman. Do you mind repellent language backed by the kindest manner in the world? Fireworks—fireworks—would not harm a mouse nor frighten a beetle.

Of course, when it is baby, or illness, mother says nothing. Providence is a cut above a Grand Duchess.

Before we hurry on, let me explain uncle Dimitri. Stand on tiptoe, please, if you are small ; uncle Dimitri, our father's cousin, a general of His Imperial Majesty's forces, is a mighty man and powerfully large. There is nothing small about him. His whiskers are splendid, his shoulders massive. He stands six feet five in his stockings. He adores babies, and single-handed he defended a pass in the Turkish war. With consummate coolness he sliced five hundred advancing Turks, flinging them neatly, when he had finished with them, over the precipice. It is history.

The Emperor commended him for his valour, and bestowed on him the cross of St. George, and other minor distinctions.

Uncle Dimitri has never married.

He finds that Russja-Kaja gives him all the satisfaction of a home without the thorns. Except for very occasional visits to Petersburg he has stayed with us a considerable time—an honoured, appreciated guest. He has occupied the red room in the west wing for twenty-two years. He is considered quite one of the family.

Now and again, at long intervals, when he has been rubbed up the wrong way, he talks of packing his ancient military trunks, unlooping his famous sword gleaming over his narrow camp bed, and leaving us.

He strikes an attitude—a monumental attitude of fiery reproach and splendid line—such a decorative man ! (You ought to see him strung up with all his orders and stars, and ribbons, attired in his gala uniform—why even Vera's fat baby chuckles with glee.)

‘ Anna Nicolajevna,’ he says, ‘ I am an old man. Would you have me die without seeing Napoleon’s tomb, without kissing a grisette ? ’

'Remember the children,' says mother, sweeping a comprehensive look round. There are always sure to be some of us present.

Our morals are very carefully considered.

The giant expands his wonderful chest. 'The children!' he echoes with magnificent contempt. 'My friend, you have too many!'

Mother agrees with her tormentor. She answers very meekly, 'Take your choice, Dimitri Andrejevitch, through which one will you run your sword?'

The children, who are present, fix him with inquisitive and roundly staring eyes.

At Anna Nicolajevna's choice piece of wit—the giant's evil temper bursts as a bubble—not a grain of bounce left in him. To sign a truce he generally kisses mother gallantly on her cheek, first her right hand and then her left cheek. Mother salutes him on his broad brow.

Invariably, if tante Katja has been an apprehensive witness to the histrionic scene—it is all acting, but tante Katja belongs to the nervous sisterhood—she will at this point drop her tatting, or sneeze—anything to create a diversion.

Tante Katja is also one of our permanent guests, and a very real blessing. She tats all the edgings required for our under-linen, and she knows twenty-eight varieties of patience.

She is very frail and very small, with tiny, delicate hands, silver hair, pencilled eyebrows, and faded eyes. Her nose is one or two sizes too big for her face, now that her cheeks have fallen in. In our eyes she is a lovely old lady. We would all be dreadfully sorry if she had her big boxes packed and left us.

As she is a perfect lady and knows her place, she never pains Anna Nicolajevna by suggesting an impossibility.

Tante Katja is quite alone in the world. She is my mother's third cousin twice removed, and that puts her back an unconscionable distance. However, mutual affection makes nothing of distance. She could not be dearer to us if she were our grandmother. She has always had a grandmother's privilege in spoiling us. She may have her favourites, but she has never disclosed her preference. She has nursed us all in her frail arms, and now she is delighted to do the same by Anna Nicolajevna's grandchildren.

Tante Katja has had her romance—what woman has not? Years and years ago, when it was May with her, the sea took her lover. The sea left her loverless.

Tante Katja does not wear her heart upon her sleeve, but we all know and reverence her story.

He might have been an indifferent sailor and just an ordinary gentleman, but we fancy him a marvel of beauty and talent, worthy of tante Katja's lifelong fidelity.

‘One love, one faith—God knows,
Bright as a beacon glows,
Searching the golden way
Of one perfect day.’

I wonder what tante Katja looked like when her soft hair was threaded with sunshine?

There is a picture of her in the drawing-room, with ringlets and a tightly laced bodice and sloping shoulders and quite amazing eyes, considering their present size. Do tears wear away eyes? It is such a very long time since the greedy sea took toll of tante Katja's youth. Yet she has never forgotten. Is not that a charming woman?

She is charming, and highly educated, and quiet. She is not a brilliant talker, but a brilliant listener—uncle Hyppolyth says, of the two, the latter is by far the most difficult part to grow into. Youth never listened to anyone.

Uncle Hyppolyth has the privilege of talking. He is our accredited story-teller—the royal story-teller, by appointment, to the noble family of Daraskoff; principal seat, Russja-Kaja.

The fairies gave him his diploma. He has a fine imagination. Give him a loaf of stodgy bread, and he will fill it, in a twinkle, with golden currants and ripe plums and spice and all that is nice.

His arrival at Russja-Kaja was also timed by the fairies. Uncle Dimitri was just settling down nicely—he had been about two years at Russja-Kaja—when one boisterous autumn evening uncle Hyppolyth appeared on the scene, carrying in his hand a black pig-skin bag, furnished with a brass snap lock. The bag contained his worldly possessions.

Rumour had preceded him by some months.

My parents knew uncle Hyppolyth very well. They had always esteemed his character, and at the same time, for his own sake, wished some amendments.

Hyppolyth Ivanovitch, Count Gagrin, lost his fortune through sentiment.

I cannot vouch for the details of the story which struck him off the list of the rich, something to do with a harpy of a lawyer graced with a smooth tongue and a beautiful daughter. If you are to believe what has been told you—in an incredibly short time the two together managed to despoil the sentimentalist of everything except his belief in human nature.

That last clause speaks volumes for the dignity of uncle Hyppolyth's character. He has no worldly wisdom, in fact from a worldly point of view he is tragically foolish.

We snap our fingers at the world at Russja-Kaja. From our point of view uncle Hyppolyth is a delight.

Let us sum up his gifts. A gentle nature, a patient spirit, a retiring, modest disposition—backed, by what? A supreme musical talent. To hear uncle Hyppolyth play on his beloved violin is a revelation and a history, and a joy, and a thousand subtle things besides.

I tell you there is music in his touch and music in his tone; a fool—who said a fool! The crafty lawyer, I expect, hugging his deeds of pillage.

Let him hug them! Who knows? if uncle Hyppolyth had kept his fortune we might have lost him. He is one of the pillars of Russja-Kaja. He and his music and his charming personality.

A little old man to-day. He is close on seventy-eight, and I am afraid he looks his age. Troubles tell, financial troubles and the mystical troubles of the spirit. God ought to have guarded him better. God has given uncle Hyppolyth an enemy, and he found him, that boisterous night, twenty odd years ago, standing large and massive in the great saloon of Russja-Kaja.

A playful hit of fate, an unkind little entirely needless by-show.

They—the Enemies—did not fall foul of each other.

They concealed their surprise and muffled their hate as a pair of true gentlemen. In deference to the presence of the ladies, Anna Nicolajevna and tante Katja, they bowed to each other profoundly.

You may be sure our mother received uncle Hyppolyth, that boisterous night twenty years ago, with marked cordiality. She is especially kind to poor relatives.

She is a woman of quick intuition. One glance at the black pig-skin bag, her guest's threadbare coat, his blue fingers—he arrived frozen—convinced her that he was not rolling in wealth; half a glance at the giant, talking rapidly to tante Katja about nothing at all, told her the

only contretemps of uncle Hyppolyth's arrival was the presence of uncle Dimitri.

All the time, as she conversed pleasantly with uncle Hyppolyth about his journey, Petersburg, mutual friends, and watched him drink his hot tea, her memory was sharpening ! She recalled the quarrel. She said nothing. She hoped it would blow over.

Perhaps she is still hoping ?

For twenty years the enemies have never directly addressed each other.

They never forget.

Never by any chance.

What a stolidly mysterious affair !

They are wonderful and deliberate enemies.

No one knows the exact truth about the quarrel.

Some say it was caused by a love affair—uncle Hyppolyth is also a bachelor. Then surely he went to the wall ? No girl in her right mind would care for such an undersized lover, if she had the chance of a giant with large ways ?

Even now at seventy-two, uncle Dimitri is a hawk—so Vera says when she wants to gratify him, assuming herself the position of a pouter pigeon.

' What an uncle ! ' she says, with her most languishing glance.

Then again there is a story about a supper party, a jest, a jeering, tinkling, terrier kind of laugh. The jest was uncle Dimitri's, the laugh uncle Hyppolyth's.

Another report has it that the mischief was done by a party of young guardsmen, headed by uncle Dimitri—an idiotic practical joke—which turned their friendship into gall and wormwood, a bitterness past description.

Not evaporated by now ? Still bitter ? Why the acidity of their quarrel sets my teeth on edge !

Imagine the sweet sunshine of Russja-Kaja, the influence of Anna Nicolajevna—‘one good woman and true’—the daily companionship of tante Katja, their own excellent dispositions. All of no avail. Barring this one awful trait, the uncles are as smooth and sweet as the cream on the top of the morning milk. They are nice, kind, wholesome gentlemen, warranted free from vice ; pleased with everything, gratified and easily fed, excellent friends elsewhere, excellent uncles, and led each by a proverbial touch.

I will tell you what gives the quarrel such immense distinction. The Enemies love each other. As nasty a tangle as ever beset two upright and honest friends.

Every morning and every evening the Enemies bow to each other.

Uncle Dimitri fixes uncle Hyppolyth’s bald head ; uncle Hyppolyth looks at uncle Dimitri’s magnificent chest—and they incline towards each other, an icy, frigid, damnable formal bow.

No hurried, curt nod as much as to say, ‘There you are, old sinner. Never expect me to forgive you ! This is only a polite sop to custom, and because Anna Nicolajevna expects it of us’—no, the Enemies incline before each other with profound respect.

Twenty odd years is as nothing in an old home : twenty years of sunshine and shadow ; twenty years of imperceptible growth and startling change. Compare the tree planted when Vera was born to Vera herself ! Why, the tree is practically a youngster, slender, tall, pretty—and Vera, slender, tall, pretty, is a mother !

Uncle Hyppolyth says, except for the children growing up and starting their own babies, he would never remember the flight of time. ‘Time is on the wing,’ no, it is we who

are on the wing, as the poet puts it. I rather love a poetical explanation, it is so comprehensive.

The old trees, in the green park, whisper to the young trees of many, many things. They feast on memory, the old trees. Around the old house they stand, serenely dignified.

They look down upon the babies and continue whispering, talking amongst themselves.

We are very proud of our old trees, they flank the house so splendidly—to the right and to the left two grand avenues straight as arrows. Only here and there a gap, a fallen giant; a wind-caught, storm-tossed, decayed giant. Life exacts her penalty. Even the great trees are not proof against time.

Spring feathers the nest of time. Spring shoots up as an everlasting covenant. When the wild flowers bloom, who remembers that summer is on the wing? Sufficient unto the day is the glory thereof.

The spirit of summer sits squarely at Russja-Kaja. She sings from morning till eve; and if she sleeps at night, she vacates her throne for some fairy warbler—a dream bird, a soul bird, a heart bird—call it what you will—if you have ever heard his singing.

Anna Nicolajevna is constantly hearing this remarkable creature. Uncle Hyppolyth says his proper name is a kind thought.

During the very first month of his residence at Russja-Kaja uncle Hyppolyth benefited by his hostess's sense of sound.

He had to have a birthday.

Anna Nicolajevna has often told us of the exigencies of the case.

'A sentimental man is so very sensitive,' she says; 'we were obliged to flout the almanack. As if I did not know

that your uncle Hyppolyth was born six months later in the year ! Shirts never ask questions, they only go into rags.' Anna Nicolajevna flings out her hands. She always gesticulates when she grows excited.

' What could I do ?—he absolutely craved a dozen new shirts, and as to his overcoat you could put your two fingers through it—the snow thick on the ground—and his chest—'

There was no necessity to apologise.

We have all been brought up to fear the Chest.

Every time uncle Hyppolyth is down with a cold he puts the whole family in a fever of anxiety. One never can tell which dire road a delicate chest may take—pneumonia, bronchitis, inflammation of the lungs, pleurisy, to mention only a few short-cuts to death.

Each time uncle Hyppolyth is laid up uncle Dimitri is simply unbearable—he carries on to such an extent that he makes living a penance. A very demon of suspicion possesses him. He fancies we are all in a league against uncle Hyppolyth—a dastardly league to do him out of life. And he never apologises when he finds that he has made a mistake. He only sighs with satisfaction.

Strange how a wee spirit can work in a man. I have the greatest belief in our familiar spirits. I wish God had the sole ordering of them. It is troublesome when the devil puts in his men—such disgraceful imps.

Glory, nothing has prevented us all being together this summer.

The sisters arrived on the very day they promised, and the day showed up fine.

We all, in excellent time, strolled down to the park bridge to meet the old-fashioned paddle steamer.

Quite a long way off the genial captain called out in a

stentorian voice, ‘I have brought you half of my cargo, and the warmest day of the year !’

The sun was shining brilliantly, wrapping Anna Nicolajevna in a sheet of fire.

She stood well in advance of her party, a noticeable figure dressed in a red cotton gown liberally embroidered in white thread with a prominent and uneasy pattern.

She wore no hat—hats are distinctly at a discount at Russja-Kaja (always with the exception of McArthur’s top-hat, which has quite a savage importance¹ and a marvellous capacity for wear). Her lace scarf had slipped off her burnished brown hair on to her massive shoulders. Round her neck she wore her amber beads, and all her turquoises. I assure you, miles off, she must have looked a picture. No one noticed her ornaments or her new dress. The sisters had no eyes except for her dear face.

‘Welcome home, my darlings !’ Anna Nicolajevna’s voice bore as a bird, and rivalled the captain’s in strength.

Quite a long way off Vera held up her new baby on view. The new baby is always such an interesting person.

Uncle Dimitri in the excitement of the moment behaved as a schoolboy, shouting and capering all over the place.

‘Remember the bridge,’ warned tante Katja. The park bridge is distinctly rotten.

The chattering birds made as fine a noise as any of us, curiously watching the disembarkation. ‘Look,’ said the birds, ‘what a congregation of pleasant faces. Not an unhappy one amongst them, except the new baby’s, who is crying for the moon.’

It took some considerable time before everyone and everything had safely come ashore. Each family brought

¹ In some African tribes the white man’s silk hat is a much-coveted possession and is only worn by their chiefs as a sign of sovereignty.

its own contingent of maids and nurses. Mixed luggage, including perambulators and baths.

A big crate of live chickens was jammed on top of someone's dress-trunk. A brand-new treadle sewing-machine was carefully lowered beside a basket of empty jars and bottles.

Mademoiselle Cleo, the dressmaker, fluttered excitedly around the sewing-machine—peering at the ticket to make sure of the bargain.

The hens cackled hoarsely.

And everyone talked at once.

The captain wiped his face and saluted. The little steamer backed—making a prodigious noise. The river foamed round her wheels as whipped champagne.

Suddenly Vera's voice cut above all the others in piercing accents.

'Captain!—my new hat—I left it in the saloon.'

The little steamer, bubbling more silently, stayed at an acute angle. A sailor bolted for the hat and flung it across the water into the arms of a brilliant wet-nurse. Exclamations; thanks; good-byes. The little steamer turned right about and disappeared.

'You will get everything you have forgotten to-morrow when the captain passes by,' consoled uncle Hyppolyth, catching up three brown-paper parcels, and making for the house, escorted by the twins. Vera caught them up by the garden gate.

The youngest baby is such an interesting child—it is always interesting; this year it is a lady, and it belongs to Vera, and it put no one out.

After dinner the whole party assembled in the great saloon. Dinner had passed off most successfully—a favourite dish for each married daughter; Anna Nico-

lajevna would like also to pamper the tastes of their husbands, but they have got to wait—we never have more than three courses at dinner and fruit, when it suits McArthur. He is awfully mean about his fruit.

Vera has brought her husband, also little Olga her devoted ‘Guns,’ Marussa’s princeling is on military duty. We were all sorry or, rather, resigned. Anna Nicolajevna is great-hearted—yet you cannot expect a mother to take the same personal interest in her sons-in-law as in her home daughters. We are all essentially mother’s children. Some girls, when they marry, turn to their husband’s people. Ruth may be an excellent biblical character; we are just as pleased she did not ‘happen’ at Russja-Kaja.

Uncle Dimitri held the youngest baby at a tremendous arm’s length and carefully bobbed it up and down.

‘Coo! little monster,’ he said in a terrible voice; ‘one day a man will tyrannise over you, or you will keep him roasting—there is no escaping fate.’

‘Don’t kill the precious thing,’ cried the anxious mother. The new baby was turning brick-red in the face.

The grandmother, to prevent catastrophe, snatched the treasure to her heart, exclaiming tragically, ‘Dimitri Andrejevitch, you are an unparalleled monster! The angel is going to cry.’

Uncle Dimitri visibly shrank. He solemnly placed his pince-nez in position and bent his huge form over the threatening baby.

‘Never in the world,’ he said, ‘I beg of you, Anna Nicolajevna, take care!’

We all laughed, the giant’s tone of voice was too funny. He adores babies, and when they are very young he is terribly frightened of them.

I think he would much prefer to face a howling horde of armed nomads single-handed than a new baby with a

crooked face. So much for the valour of our soldiers ! So much for their war trophies ! Between ourselves, do you think uncle Dimitri deserves three swords of honour, chased gold hilts set with brilliants ? I will not give you my opinion.

Uncle Hyppolyth, rocking peacefully in his own chair, followed the little scene with a very kind expression.

Suddenly he laughed—a snatch of a tinkling terrier laugh. He immediately repressed himself. He buried the laugh in a great silk handkerchief—he strangled it by a sneeze.

When he had finished he looked up at uncle Dimitri—unobserved—so sadly.

It rather looks as if his conscience worried him.

CHAPTER VI

A MATTER OF PRIDE

M^CARTHUR looked down the sunny garden.
It was very hot, and very delightful, and quite early in the morning.

'Miss Jane,' he said, 'happiness canna be weighed in gold—it's a varre delicate substance, and rare in the keeping.'

McArthur, with a critical eye, fixed the base of Venus, Mercury, Hercules, and Apollo, beautiful Apollo, where tall weeds flourished unrepressed.

Once in six weeks they are mowed down, neck and branch; the scythe cannot reach their roots; as the curved blade swishes through their ranks the nettles have the laugh of McArthur.

'What a job,' they say. 'A hurryman, make-shift business . . . steady roots, you will be all the stronger for it.'

Mercifully McArthur is deaf. He will not own up to it, but if you speak softly to him you will get a random answer.

I asked gently if the strawberries were coming on. I also said how delightful it was to have sisters at home.

He answered me gloomily. 'Twenty-five able-bodied weemen only kept to weed the paths. I do my best to give satisfaction, but you canna, saving a meericle, work with empty hands.'

Fifty years ago the great gardens of Russja-Kaja were

kept in apple-pie order—whatever that means. McArthur tells us the extravagant Count flew into a mild rage at the sight of a dandelion, and that he took an early frost in a very bad spirit.

My grandfather must have had an extravagant notion of money. Very probably he considered it feasible for a very wealthy gentleman to buy up the sun and let it out according to fancy. Given a spoilt man and a rich man, there is no end to his fallacies.

Looking back, it is easy enough to follow my grandfather's point of view. He belonged to an extravagant age. He kept up Russja-Kaja in proper style. We young people feel almost drowned in McArthur's superlative description of *le grand âge*.

We stare at the broken fountains, half hidden in rank grass, and see them playing for all they were worth. We look down the disorderly grove of the gods, and we fancy it smooth as a bowling-green, swept and garnished, strewn with silver gravel—fit walking for the satin-slipped ladies, the laughing, beautiful young ladies who always formed the backbone of the 'company' so prodigiously entertained by the extravagant Count.

We quite believe in the satisfaction of all concerned. Under the mildew of Venus and Apollo we discover their pristine freshness. We admire them in the spirit of those beautiful young ladies who, once upon a time, walked in the moonlight and delighted the grove by the sound of their delicious laughter.

'Look at the grounds, miss, stupendous . . . seven men, counting every raw lad—ten weemen, counting every flighty strumpet. My hands are tied. . . .'

Jeremiah ! This is not the morning for dust and ashes and grievances ! McArthur really has no sense of proportion.

He droned on, rather like an angry bumble-bee. ‘ It just comes to this—vegetables or flowers. Ye canna expect both, barring the meericle.’

He snapped his thin mouth, as a dragon-fly snaps her wings when she has had enough of flying. He left me, watching a butterfly poised on Minerva’s extended hand.

I sighed. The beauty of it all ! Who cares a rap for bedding out plants, playing fountains, immaculate summer-houses when the great sun is overhead, warming and gilding her world—our world !

I laughed. The wind carried my laugh over the walls of the great kitchen garden, which McArthur loves as a child, a deserving, helpful child. The vegetables pay.

McArthur is Scotch and straitlaced and prejudiced. Not even as a ‘ raw lad,’ fresh to the scene of enchantment, was he impressed by the Italian statuary.

Now he frankly condemns them.

‘ Who would buy the ugly creatures ? ’ he asks.

Surely the distressed gods and goddesses will revenge themselves one day ! One wintry day they will jump on the packed snow and surround McArthur and box his ears until they tingle as fire when he enters his over-heated cottage.

Poor Mercury, poor Venus, waved aside as being of less value than a broccoli or a new potato.

I am afraid I am not very clever at seeing things.

In my eyes Russja-Kaja, in spite of its decay, is the most beautiful place in the world.

I never miss the showy flower-beds of old, a blaze of colour. I never expect the moss-grown, chipped fountains to play, I never imagine the Swiss chalet wedged to unbroken fretwork and glittering paint.

I rather like her as she is—poor old forsaken summer-house. She is just as picturesque as ever she was in her

staring youth. What matters if no one enters her once charming interior—for fear of dumping into a pit below ? What matters if no one leans over her precariously rickety balcony rail to throw bread-crumbs to the stately swans ?

The chalet is built on the edge of the artificial lake. The lake looks artificial and rather dried up, and it would be silly to throw bread-crumbs to invisible swans.

Like everything else belonging to the extravagant age, the white swans of Russja-Kaja have vanished. The survivor, a very tough bird, was served on a great silver dish, ornamented with its own tail feathers, at Vera's wedding breakfast.

At times the melancholy lake is still beautiful.

The irises cluster thickly on its shallow banks ; graceful birches and flowering shrubs, when in their prime, are for ever trying to steal a look at their sweet reflection in the dark water, and, alas, for ever the stagnant weeds try to frustrate their innocent vanity ; the purple clematis sheds her fluttering blossoms on a surface treacherously green and slimy. Only if a strong wind blows do the liberated waters move to a gentle ripple, and slowly but surely drive the unsightly fungi into a corner.

I assure you, particularly at daybreak, if the wraiths of over-fed and pompous swans are allowed to return to their earthly haunts,—the show birds of Russja-Kaja would find themselves quite at home on their old waters, and glide about happily in the rosy reflection of a new-born day.

The grounds of Russja-Kaja were planned on an extraordinarily large scale. There is really no end to the tortuous and unnecessary paths which cross and re-cross the great park—maybe ending in a cul-de-sac, a mysterious grotto, or leading to a ‘surprise.’

A devilish ingenuity there is about these out-at-elbows summer-houses, and as to their variety any sensible archi-

tect would, assuredly, at the sight of them go stark, staring mad.

Here we have a Chinese pagoda, enclosed in an enchanted valley—there a cottage of Kent, all thatched and gabled—still farther away a Greek temple, a solemn elegant building round as a circle and furnished with cast-iron seats ; for an imitation quite a jewel of price, its site alone gives it glory. Given a fair evening it is wrapped in the sparkle of sunset, and at all times and at all seasons it has the river well in view, in spite of the massed foliage of venerable trees—trees to the right and trees to the left—the singing river below, the broad sky above, and the green swards touching its very foundation. Our Greek temple has something to boast of, besides being in tolerable repair. By moonlight each slim white pillar, supporting the domed roof, looks not only elegant, but most convincingly strong, nor is the illusion dispelled by daylight—our one ‘surprise’ which does credit to the place.

I pray you pass quickly by the mosque, and thank God for the intervening firs—the firs are so splendid and strong and straight, and the poor old mosque looks so crookedly out of place, so faded, so wretched, so tawdry, so cheap, a blot on the memory of the extravagant Count. He had an attack of meanness the day he built that trumpery affair. Call it a mosque ! as well call it a kiosk, and expect a fair waitress to serve you a glass of bubbling water from its feeble doorway.

Quite excellently well placed is the tower, and a favourite walk with visitors, who like to get at the wilderness with the minimum of exertion. The tower has panted up a rugged hill, and has a commanding view, and is immensely proud of the fact. She is always challenging people, lovers in particular, to climb her rickety stairs and give her credit for speaking the truth.

Miles and miles of impenetrable forest—and away, across the river, sweeping lowlands, field upon field of cultivated land, broken by the irregular outline of the village.

Our village.

A creaky old ferry connects us with the village ; it is in constant use, and forms quite a picturesque adjunct to the landscape.

A grey old village climbing up from the broken banks of the river, and straggling away, in broken file, towards the dark line of forest.

At night-time, through tiny panes, the modest lights of the cottage homes shine out as scattered glowworms, winter nights and autumn nights. I doubt if anyone wastes his precious oil in the summer—our luminous, clear summer nights are sufficient unto themselves. For the matter of that the villagers infinitely prefer, weather permitting, to spend their free time under God's open roof, sitting more or less close together on the banks of the river, either listening to the silence or uniting in some favourite part-song.

Our people are musical.

Often as not our uncouth peasantry hide in their rude bodies poetical souls—souls which rise above the hardships of incessant toil and dull monotony. What a life it is ! What will be the reward ?

I love to hear them singing—these sons and daughters of poverty ; there is a richness about their music which appeals to our sentiments or to our sympathies. You cannot hear the music of tired voices entirely unmoved. God lifts the cap of darkness and flashes a circle of light upon the group of men and women who, after a day of incessant toil, find the heart to gather together on the banks of the river and lift their voices in praise.

No lilting strain of gladness is in our Russian part-songs —through all their melody runs a vein of sadness—and

something besides, a virtue very difficult to explain, very easy to understand.

Standing out of sight, say, in the dim recesses of the temple, you are at liberty to construe what you like out of the magic of those mingled voices, each note true as an honest heart.

I sometimes, listening, forget the patient human strain, the century-old, familiar songs, stealing out of the darkness into the quiet night. I am surrounded by the piping chorus of little people, goblins, sprites, elves, fairy watchers, fairy singers—imbued with the witchery of the moment. I am ready to follow the piper—to believe what he tells me, to see what he shows me.

Music gives to the broken fountains the sound of leaping waters. Set to fantastic wonder, the old park wakes from her sleep, alive to the memory of old days. The place is flung open to the public; it is peopled by a former generation—a confident, self-satisfied, happy generation, famous for wit and beauty.

Through the forsaken park the rustle of silk is heard, no louder than the fanning of a night moth's wing flying towards the light.

The music of tired voices sweeps aside the cobwebs of the deserted pleasure-houses. Music and trust paint the faded pagoda in the richest of Chinese blues, and open the brilliant buds of perpetual flowers around the Swiss chalet.

Have you the faith to see and the mind to hear?

The listening gods and goddesses, touched by the risen moon, take part in the pageantry of love—bravely flinging their mossy cloaks aside, they take their chance.

Up and down the great park, in and out of shadowy groves, unsuspected corners, open spaces, and hedged-in gardens, the pale moon wanders—the fairy piper blows his reed, the night wind stirs the branches of the green trees,

and the music of tired voices consolidates and glorifies the picture.

McArthur and I took up our conversation later on in the day.

I am rather like the old lady who said 'Scissors'—you know the story, of course?

The old lady had an old husband and he said 'Knives.' They could not agree. At last the old husband, to win his argument, drowned his old lady. As she rose to the surface for the last time, she held up two pointed fingers. A strong-minded old lady. No woman likes to own herself beaten.

I looked at McArthur.

'My mother has a heart of gold,' I said. 'If she had the means she would be just as extravagant as that heedless old Count. She would faint at the sight of a dandelion.'

As I spoke I crushed my heel on the head of a yellow plague. We were standing on the rose lawn. The fat baby in a pink smock was picking daisies. Under the great elms sat Anna Nicolajevna, in a rainbow, surrounded by most of her children.

I felt sorry directly I had snuffed out the dandelion; weed or no weed, every flower has a right to live.

The Broad Walk was looking lovely in the evening sun. Fanny and Sascha were walking, arm in arm, up and down, under the old apple trees. The group under the elms watched them with kindly interest.

We always take a human interest in our lovers. I am sorry to tell you, Sascha is not up to our standard. He is not a patch on 'Guns'; he is unequal to the Prince; he cannot hold a candle, either in appearance or position, to the Diplomat.

The only beauty about the business is that Fanny does not see it. She does not notice that Sascha is prosy, that he

has precise manners, and knows exactly what he wants. Very lucky for Fanny.

They are to be married—three weeks from to-day.

At least that is the idea, but everything depends on Cleo—our dressmaker.

Every article in the trousseau is made at home, and Anna Nicolajevna will never start in time. In spite of three warnings she is as dilatory as ever.

She has a most childish belief in luck. Sometimes she does get a slap in her face—only bad luck would dare to slap our mother. And even then she bears it cheerfully.

Not so the fiancés.

Owing, probably, to stress of work, invariably as the date of a wedding approaches, our dressmaker, Mademoiselle Cleo, gets feverish. There is no mistaking the symptoms : all her curls seem to jinkle, her thin bosom is pricked by steely pins, her thin cheeks show angry spots, her bright eyes grow sharp as needles—all this is nothing compared to the culmination. Mademoiselle takes to her bed.

Everything in the workroom comes to a standstill.

Mademoiselle keeps to her bed.

Such a commotion in the house !

Vera's diplomatic husband quite lost his temper.

'I have made all my arrangements,' he said.

Anna Nicolajevna thought it as nothing compared to the spoiling of the wedding salmon.

'Why not start in time ?' he said.

The folly of men, thought our mother.

'Why not get rid of her ?' he asked.

Anna Nicolajevna looked at her prospective son-in-law and asked him to go away. She told him she hated marrying her daughters, and that Mademoiselle Cleo had worked for the family for twenty years.

That settled the matter. Cleo stayed her week in bed.

The salmon had to come down in the world, and, minus decorations, put in an appearance at a family dinner. The Diplomat had to exercise his patience.

He did it well because he loved Vera.

I wonder what kind of figure Sascha will cut under similar circumstances ? I will be bound Cleo will not spare him.

There is chaos in the workroom. One of Cleo's best girls, a skirt hand, has failed her. We all know the wedding dress material has not arrived. Poor Sascha, his chances are small !

However, we can but hope for the best, and look out for the worst, as McArthur says.

It struck me the other day that pride is a queer business. I can well understand McArthur's pride in his 'Latiny,' but I cannot fathom his conceit in the fact that he has never, during all these long years, mastered our language.

It must be insular. I have heard that English people glory in never learning any language but their own, and that but poorly.

When McArthur first came to us he gave all his instructions through an interpreter. For some years now he has taken matters into his own hands, and manages to make himself understood in a truly marvellous jargon, half-English, half-Latin, and a grain or two of bad Russian.

The Ivans and the Sonjays have mastered his code.

It is characteristic of the dear old Scotchman that he addresses all the men under him as 'Ivan,' and all the women as 'Sonjay.'

Sometimes this habit of his leads to difficulties, but, generally speaking, it works smoothly enough.

Speaking individually of any member of his meagre staff, McArthur labels each one with his most marked feature.

There is an Ivan-redbeard, Ivan-terrible, Ivan-giant, Ivan-smallpox, and an Ivan-vodki.

Amongst the women he counts his toothless Sonjay a ten-Sonjay (applying not to her years, but to the extent of her family), a young-Sonjay, and I think there is a pretty-Sonjay.

It is unlike McArthur to encourage vanity ; probably the pretty one has dropped her title. McArthur concentrates all his energy in encouraging discipline and diligence in his little staff, and though they do their best he always thinks they are holding something back.

Besides, as Mascha, our old maid, says :

‘ That stuck-up man would not be satisfied if the glorious St. Nicholas himself descended from heaven and did his work for him—there is no pleasing some people ! ’

Old Mascha was born a serf at Russja-Kaja. She has lived here all her life and is devoted to the family. She is also a prodigy of industry.

‘ Fifteen bedrooms to do,’ she said, without boasting, ‘ more or less single-handed, but I wish they were twenty if it pleased Anna Nicolajevna. The gracious, gracious lady ! May the blessings of glory rest on her, and on her children, and on her friends. . . .’

Mascha’s blessings are always limitless.

She is very religious.

Every morning when she calls me she first prostrates herself in front of my ikon—such a lovely Christ-face—before she touches the floor with her wrinkled forehead, just in front of my narrow bed, exclaiming :

‘ St. Nicholas be praised, Jane Sergejevna lives ! ’

It is rather nice to wake to the sound of thanksgiving.

I am always thankful to be alive.

CHAPTER VII

A SENTIMENTAL CHAPTER AND A BLACK BOARD

HOW I wish I could gather my ideas together, and bind them smoothly in a great, odorous, goodly bundle, and that they would never, never lose their fragrance.

Alas ! thoughts are as sunbeams, deliciously warm and bright, and, heigh-presto ! a sudden cloud and all their charm has vanished.

The little pattern they made on the old flagged stones is no more. And those particular sunbeams are gone for all eternity.

Others may come, just as warm, just as pleasant, just as fanciful. It is not the same thing. If you told Vera her new baby made up for her dead baby she would not believe you. Nothing takes so much convincing as a living regret.

My thoughts are as the mist, floating shadows, no more. When I try to gather them together they float away, float down a mythical stream, past mythical blue roses and yellow-hearted daisies.

Dreams are of more importance than thoughts, which are as the blue mists on the hills.

I wish I were a fairy, and that I could compel my thoughts to stay in the sunlight and grow, put out great buds, and break into lovely flowers.

Then I would gently gather the flowers and lay them on this page ever growing, ever living flowers. For every thought which lives is always growing—grafted on to the

mother tree of life, comforting the sick, bringing good cheer to the weary.

Are not the old poems, the dear, well-known words of infinite value, of infinite trust ?

I wish I were a poet, if only a humble, gentle, little child's poet. Fancy the joy of twining yourself around the heart of a child !

Far out in the ghostly future, the sealed dark future, where the great unknown points her finger across the trackless plains, my liberated soul would hover joyfully, reading each innocent mind.

I would fly past the great and the learned, past men and their train of beasts, past the caravans of the rich and indolent, past the great stream of consolidated knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil, and dwell happily with the tender little ones, and be glad of their trusting love.

They would welcome me, understand me, love me !

I am a long way off my goal. Vera's babies do love me—a little ; but I want all the babies of the world to love me, the young at heart ! Who knows I do not include the grown-up babies in my select company, the uncles Dimitri and the uncles Hyppolyth of this world ? Some people never seem to lose a touch of forget-me-not blue in their eyes, no matter how old they are.

It is a comfort to know that good people are always with us. They are always sure to rise again, just as the flaming poppies return each summer, shooting out of the earth, first green and tender, and then glowingly vivid.

Good, kind people are as hardy annuals ; they do not want careful watching. No one pays them much attention ; some do not even seem to see them.

McArthur despises the poppies ; they give him no trouble, and, except for their first outlay, they neither tax nor contribute to the Green Box,

I am afraid McArthur is a flinty financier—he will reckon everything in money.

We have had great talks on the subject ; he never walks in cloudland, and I would just hate to always burrow under the earth.

‘ Weel, miss,’ he says, ‘ it is this way about.’

He condescends to argue the subject. Some people, when they are very sure you are wrong, only sniff at you. Contempt is biting.

I tell McArthur things I would not have the courage to tell anyone else. And when he does not understand me he puts it down to a foreignism. It is convenient both ways. It leaves me a tremendous space ; and he has always got a loophole of escape. I think it is called honourable defeat. I am sure McArthur considers it a victory of sorts —for himself. There is nothing like your own point of view.

‘ You are wrong,’ I say, ‘ entirely wrong.’ I am the only one who dares to take a liberty with McArthur.

I never convince him ; needless to say, he never convinces me.

I am beginning to doubt him. As a child I considered him incredibly ‘ wormy,’ no better than a parsimonious mole—if there is such a creature—a dutiful, strictly righteous, honest earth-grubber. McArthur would not steal as much as a dandelion, and his praise is very just, and his wrath justified.

Since I have grown up and put up my hair, which makes a lot of difference in a person’s views, I have grown suspicious.

Underneath that crusty exterior, beneath that formidable top-hat there lurks a spirit of romance.

There has been a woman in old McArthur’s life.

I discovered the truth by chance.

I came upon it last autumn—a splendid apple year. . . . Not only were the orchards bowed down in plenty, but golden Astrakhans and Kentish pippins—seeds from my great-great-grandmother's native country, brought by her from far-away England—gleamed on the gnarled old apple trees lining the Broad Walk.

The Broad Walk is a broad walk. It cleaves the middle of the kitchen garden just as Moses's wand cleft the Red Sea—a sandy oasis between fields of vegetables and fruit plantations. A coach-and-four could gallop down the path without touching a single bough of those gaunt old trees. They do not always bear fruit. They are old and tired of much child-bearing. You cannot expect a tree or a woman to go on for ever.

Sometimes nature surprises one, like Sarah in the Bible, and like our dear old avenue last autumn.

The trees made a great sustained effort. They were lovely to watch in spring—all laden with pink and white blossoms. Anna Nicolajevna never ceased to sing their praises—uncle Hyppolyth to suspect the weather.

'A sudden storm, my dear,' he said, 'will ruin the blossom. What a promise! What a promise! It is a grievous pity. . . .'

And we all looked up at the cloudless sky, and let the sun kiss our faces, with mournful expressions. 'The pity of it. The pity of it.'

The storm paid us out. We had so confidently expected her visitation, that when the blossoming season ended quite comfortably and the petals covered the old avenue according to proper rules, neither too late nor too early, we almost felt disappointed. We had so certainly expected the worst.

In September the trees were a sight to behold, and then McArthur, in his turn, grew fearsome. He feared for the

village boys, the unholy, unwashed, mischievous boys who were gifted with agile limbs, warranted to climb any fence, and tongues warranted to echo any lie.

There was one thing they were afraid of. Superstition ran hot in their youthful blood. McArthur played on their young minds.

For days, when the apples hung hot and heavy in the sunlight, a torturing delight to greedy boys, he let off a small barrowful of dark sayings. Wonderful and wise were his sayings, and most of them were scoffed at, until facing the village road—a quagmire even in September—close to the rickety gate and the all-too-low fence, he placed a black board, boldly ornamented with great, white, painted Latin letter. Unreadable—but surely a message from the devil? Clusters of little boys gathered round that board, staring at the unintelligible words. Cold ran their blood, and quick ran their feet out of danger's reach. No one dared trespass beyond those voiceless letters.

And this is what McArthur had, with his own hands, painted on the notice-board :

' Ayr gurgling, kissed his pebbled shore,
O'erhung with wild woods, thickening green ;
The fragrant birch and hawthorn hoar
Twined am'rous round the raptured scene ;
The flowers sprung wanton to be prest,
The birds sang love on every spray—
Till too, too soon the glowing west
Proclaimed the speed of wing'd day.

' Still o'er the scene my mem'ry wakes,
And fondly broods with miser care !
Time but th' impression stronger makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear.
My Mary, dear departed shade !
Where is thy place of blissful rest ?
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast ?'

One evening I came upon McArthur, standing absorbed in front of the mystic board.

Perhaps I would not have noticed him had it not been for his bald head shining in the moonlight. The top-hat was reverently laid aside. He had uncovered himself before the shrine of memory.

I stole softly past him up the Broad Walk, bathed in moonlight. The dim old trees looked very mysterious, in spite of their red young apples, ripening day by day. The old trees stood motionless in the September calm, not a breeze ruffled their jewelled branches.

At the end of the avenue the big house appeared to view—white and fresh and young. Moonlight is such a beautifier.

I did not look at the familiar house. At the top of the Broad Walk I turned softly and glanced back at the old Scotchman illuminated by evergreen love.

There had been a woman in his life !

And he had not forgotten her, in spite of forty rolling years lying between him and her and the pink heather her foot once had trod.

There is something rather beautiful about romance.

I entered the house in a subdued state of mind. Involuntarily, like all young things, I selfishly remembered my own case. I let the moonbeams weave a delightful picture. . . .

. . . So delightful that I cannot in all justice write it down here. Was it not fashioned of moonbeams and a young girl's romantic mood ?

I suppose all young people are given to moonlit dreams and to the gathering of unsubstantial roses ? It is the nature of youth to frolic in the future. What kind prophets we are—to ourselves !

I went upstairs to my room and I looked out of my window.

CHAPTER VIII

A CONFIDENCE

IT is a great compliment to be asked into the toolhouse. I believe McArthur would turn the hose on an uninvited guest.

Over the toolhouse runs a wide, low loft ; it is a drying loft, and here McArthur garners his precious onions. He is immensely struck on onions, and he has not any nose to speak of. He is impervious to smells.

In September, the end of the month, the onions, spread out to dry, have lost their first sweet savour. You can quite well exist in the toolhouse below, and be thankful. They, the pearl beauties, are pungently horrible when they are first gathered. Take my advice, keep a respectful distance from the toolhouse if you happen to meet McArthur coming along—smiling, a hot August morning. That smile is a warning and a bit of unwholesome pride. He is fearfully proud of his onions.

They make money.

At McArthur's invitation I seated myself on a convenient barrel, opposite him, and looked about.

Grime, dirt, dust—treasures of twine and rusty nails, cans requiring soldering, cans requiring naught but water, garden scissors, enormous spades, enormous pickaxes, enormous forks, out-of-gear mowing-machines, rows of more or less empty colour tins, smeared and gaudy,

earthenware saucers, panes of glass of a green, cheap variety, gleaming in a corner, a wooden box under the tool-table.

During winter, for no earthly reason, the top-hat sleeps in the wooden box. Owing to our rigorous climate, McArthur goes about in a leather cap faced with black fur. It does not suit him, but it keeps his head 'comfortable.' You cannot live in headgear of sorts without getting bald. McArthur has a handsome fringe round his neck, but otherwise he is as bald as God made him. I am sure he was a bald baby. Bald babies look so clever—McArthur still has that knowing look about him.

It was a cool day in the garden—in fact, a touch of autumn in the air.

Most of the apples had been gathered. Long shadows were creeping down the Broad Walk—just visible from where I sat. The sun was in a playful mood—playing hide-and-seek amongst the drifting clouds.

A tall row of sunflowers, with great swollen hearts, brushed the toolhouse, a few coloured asters in between—McArthur's private garden.

He has a house, a ridiculous thatched cottage of Kent, all to himself—one of the extravagant Count's least flimsy toys; he sleeps in his cottage, but he rests in lonely state in his toolhouse. Rather fine, a man with two places.

You see, the cottage is in the country, as it were—it has a lovely site in the green park—the toolhouse is in the city, and McArthur, being a business man, finds it more convenient to use it when the press of affairs allows him some relaxation.

Here he smokes his pipe; here he talks, on occasions; and here he will sit on his carpenter's bench thinking—a wee.

He thought of asking me to step in a bit, so of course I came. I like to sit on the barrel.

Ever since McArthur fished me out of the artificial lake, when I was quite a small child, he has fancied me.

I had overbalanced myself feeding the Survivor. Such a graceless swan was he, that he watched me drowning without as much as ruffling a single feather of his splendid plumage.

McArthur grabbed me and saved my life ; he also shook me and scolded me. ‘Never be up to your tricks again,’ he said, and I promised—rather tearfully—a bedraggled, trembling little girl.

The Survivor looked at me unutterable dignity—feeling O so superior ! He was not superior—the toughest old bird which ever was jointed by sheer manual force.

I am not mean, so even now I am happy to know that he did not suspect his ultimate fate. Think of a proud, graceful swan degenerating into a—cookie bird ! The pity of it that he could not have flung Anna Nicolajevna a leg in time. If she had sampled him she would most certainly have left him in peace—a decorative cripple.

Trying to look comfortable on my barrel, I was struck by the mercifulness of brittle glass and an awkward movement. Quite early in the summer a clumsy Ivan had managed to smash the window facing me. It is still waiting to be ‘done.’

McArthur is methodical ; broken panes do not get mended at Russja-Kaja before the stress of summer work is over. They just have to wait. The air, the lovely air of heaven, takes advantage of this and purifies even the atmosphere of a habitually tightly closed toolhouse, with an onion-drying loft up above, and chinks, as big as cheese straws, in the flooring.

I brushed a curl out of my eyes and I looked at McArthur.

I had made up my mind to get to the bottom of the mystery. The black board had whetted my curiosity—no, sympathy. I was terribly anxious to know further details of the romantic story. I guessed roughly.

‘Drat it!’ said McArthur.

He was unravelling a piece of knotted string, standing up by the window.

A bee buzzed in through the broken pane; did not like the look of the company, and buzzed out again.

I plunged.

‘McArthur,’ I said, ‘was her name Mary?’

‘Na, miss; her name was Eliza.’

‘You loved her. Oh, you must have loved her.’

‘Yes, miss.’

I was terribly excited. He was fearfully calm.

‘What was she like?’ I balanced myself on the barrel, catching hold of the edge with both my hands. A barrel is hard sitting.

McArthur put down the string—and it was not nearly ready;—he seated himself on the bench, and he looked critically at me.

‘She hadn’t gloomy hair, miss,’ he said; ‘her hair was the brightest you’d fancy, spun gold, and she had different eyes to yours.’

‘What kind of eyes?’

‘Different, altogether different. Now, yours are dark, placed in a whitish face with a smutty finger, so to speak. Eliza was the prettiest and fairest creature you’d fancy inside a real stage-house. Red was her skin, and blue her dear eyes, dancing an’ happy. The very look of her made for happiness. . . . Ye are na patch on Eliza, miss, begging your pardon. There is na accounting for tastes. For meself I like a leddy to be tall and well-set-up. Not that you haven’t your points, miss. Sair, an’ when you laugh your

teeth appear sae straight and white they might have come straight out of a show-case. Eliza's teeth, bless her, weren't her strong point—a family failing. And her lips, maybe, weren't as red as yours, miss, nor had she your beetling brows. You've a finer nose 'an hers, hers went anyhow . . . a prettier lass, nor a kinder lass ne'er stepped in old Scotland. Her laugh just tinkled as the cowbells, and her smile was sweeter than the heather.'

'Why did you leave her ?'

'Leave her ! Am I a daft body ? Lor' bless me bones—it was she who left me, crying as a babby.'

I nodded my head, speechless at Eliza's unfaithfulness.

. . . 'She was coming across the ford one angry morning—the whole river was whippet and turbulent, and the wind shrieking fit to kill itself . . . it wasna safe . . . afore her mither's eyes—clean sweepit away, carried as a leaf by the stream. Lost her footing, my pretty dear. Ah me ! it was a lonesome day for me. "Drooned," I groaned, "drooned afore your very eyes," and her mither sobbed. "Drooned in front of me very eyes." We dragged the stream and found her body, an' gave her a decent beerial ; on the very day that was to have seen us merrit. . . . I sold the cottage and the bit o' land, and took me money and meself south, and turned to gardening, forty-three years ago come Michaelmas.'

McArthur searched his pocket and brought out a handkerchief of sorts ; he looked at it and put it back again without using it.

'Since then I have been on the wander. All is similar to me. I was maist glad to get to Roosia. I thought the distance and the novelty of the place might make me forget Lizzie's draggled skeins o' flossy silk—her hair had come down, miss, when we found her, matted to each side of her puir, swollen face, and her bit o' blue ribbon still

clinging to a plait. I took the ribbon as a keepsake. I let her hair alone—I wasna the one to fash her by pulling her hair about. She was always maist particular. . . . As proud a lass as ever stepped in shoe leather.

‘I was accounted very fortunate. She had her looks and a tidy bit o’ money. I couldna face the country-side with her gone. There was some as proposed her younger sister for me conseederation—they were fules . . . a man only loves once in his life ; once is good enough for him, if he be a mon, and not a mealy-faced foreigner.’

(I am not a foreigner to McArthur. Directly he feels sure of you and likes you he adopts you.)

‘I came south. I put meself in the hands of a decent schule, but mony a time I couldna abide the tales around me and the unholy doctrine—coming straight from a Christian country, the difference was perceptible.’

I nodded.

‘I was but a young fellow at the time, and, though I says it meself, a showable laddie with a power of learning and a power of temper held up inside me. . . . Often and often Eliza came between me an’ bottomless pride. Being riled, I naturally went for the offender, preparing myself to knock him under. I had a neat hand at a throw. Eliza would step down in the speerit and, as it were, catch hold of me intentions. “Leave weel alone, Jeames,” she’d say, “the victory is to him who crushes the deevil inside him.” I listened to her, for all that, at times, I was minded to bid her keep a quiet tongue in her head—an honest fight is not for weemen’s interference . . . it is a bit of a pull to get round the deevil, but we maunna boast.’

McArthur spoke in deep conviction—he evidently knew his man.

‘How do you get round him ? ’ I asked.

‘Lor’ bless your innocent heart, it is maist a matter of will.

I don't slide me passions on to me neighbours' shoulders—if it comes to the worst, I bottle them up inside meself, an', for fear of a bursting, a drap of whisky is healthy. It will give a mon courage on himself.'

McArthur is a temperate man. I expect he was boasting.

McArthur places great store on his education, probably he was taught self-control as well as 'Latiny' in the school down south.

We entered on matters educational.

'Yes, miss, I have always had a taste for learning, and Eliza left me free to please myself.'

'You are very clever, McArthur,' I said.

'Middling,' he answered, nevertheless looking pleased at the compliment.

We drifted back to the chief point at issue—the youth of him that went out to the youth of her. I much preferred seeing the lovers on the moor than the 'showable laddie' poring over his Latin books down south.

Led by sympathy he warmed to his subject.

'Mony an' mony a time I an' Eliza have stood together watching the burn tossing and tumbling on its way to the sea—an' admired the look o' the heather, the great rocks, an' the misty hills—such hills! Ye haven't a patch on them in this country, miss. Hills all feathery like, and purple an' pink, an' blue an' grey—just as the light falls. An' dells o' flowers, masses o' them, great splashes of colour, an' little twists and turns over the broad moorland—stretches of gorse, miss, yellow and prickly an' lovely. Over all a Scottish sun or a Scottish mist; both different in their ways—but just as lovely. I dinna ken what I appreciate better, a driving mist—soft and blurred—or a hard sunny day with a scorching, searching light blazing away in a sky bluer than blue. An' the scent of the sea

stealing over the jagged cliffs, and a bird or two, maybe, singing for dear life, an' a little cottage perched on the hill-side, with a peat fire smoking up the little chimney. It is hame, miss. An' hame, maybe, is long ways off, and maybe we haven't seen it for mony a long year—but memory just leaps across the chasm, as if it were a dolly's pool—just a wee step o' distance ! An' love, miss, that just colours the whole. The love of nature, wumman, and home—I suspect maist loves have their root in the selfsame place. Love's a very comfortable cradle. Any thought will rock comfortably in love's cradle. Just open your mind to the effort, an' the past comes rushing back like a flight of swallows, and settles on ye. . . . When the swallows come home they bring a sense o' comfort.'

The old Scotchman grew silent, but over his wrinkled face a look of great peace settled down.

I slipped off the barrel. I was not going to disturb the homing of the swallows.

I stole out of the toolhouse, out into the brilliant sunshine. Yet the air was cold, and all the apples had been garnered. The Broad Walk was looking very old and desolate.

As I looked at the trees I noticed that some of the gnarled branches were changing colour.

Away in the park the little beech tree, planted when the twins were born, had slid into a pale yellow jacket.

The first touch of autumn is always rather melancholy.
I sighed.

At seventeen love seems so immeasurably superior to everything else. And at seventy—McArthur is well on the high-road to seventy—perhaps it still remains the same !

The river was gurgling in its bed at high-water mark. I heard it murmur. And I thought of a misty Scotch sun

just breaking through the clouds, and illuminating a little turbulent Scotch brook, tossing her giddy self down an irregular hill-side all dressed in gorse and bracken, with clumps of pink heather and whortleberries—the home-side of Eliza—Eliza in heaven.

CHAPTER IX

THE HOUSE OF MANY MEMORIES

I WOULD like to show you the great House on a summer evening.

Just at the very moment when the sun is letting down her luminous drop-curtain—sending out subdued flash-lights over the face of the sky, gilding the edge of beyond, and waving a flare of red candles burning brightly between the trunks of the solemn old fir trees.

I do like that red touch peeping out of the darkness.

The glow of the happy sunset always catches the old house, embracing her tenderly, and reserving her best effect for the west front.

Coming up the Broad Walk you may well exclaim at the brilliant sight ; thirty-five high windows all illuminated as if for some great festivity—set out with thirty-five powerful fairy lights.

Alas ! the fairies are such irresponsible, restless little beings. No sooner have they made a great display than they grow tired and dance elsewhere, carrying each their fairy light, hidden in the folds of their tarlatan skirts. They never look back at the empty windows—in a desperate hurry they flutter away with noiseless feet. You can just hear the swish of their tarlatan skirts, brushing the rose petals or setting the lavender bushes trembling. Maybe the last bird on the wing escorts them home, flying over the heads of the tiny company.

Where do the fairies sleep ?

I know they wake at the first peep of dawn. The glow of the young morning sets them laughing ; as the wind ripples the river grasses, so do the fairies laugh.

Very likely they sleep in the heart of the wild flowers—packing themselves away so neatly—wrapped in their tarlatan skirts, the fairy lights below.

Sometimes they will sleep in breathless silence and sometimes they will get up and dance, just to while the time away—twinkling feet on mossy turf—fairy lights on high. A shooting star, maybe, is only a fairy torch, and the rays of the moon but a flutter of gauzy petticoats and a brave show of ethereal feet.

One never can tell.

Anyhow, it is pleasant to think of them out there, hundreds and thousands and millions of little people enjoying a beautiful summer night.

In winter they cover themselves up with snowflakes—masses of snowflakes—feathery and soft and warm, and they go to sleep for ever so long ; the fairies are seldom astir in winter, under the snow they are planning surprises. . . .

I want to show you the old house when the mists of night are rising—rising from the river and floating over the lowlands, a very tangible presence hiding the lower branches of the little trees and quite concealing the brown ant-hills.

When the mists drift away night has come.

A soft summer night, a scented night, a cloudless night of June.

Maybe a fair sky overhead, a starless sky, only a shade or two paler than day—and, towards the horizon, stretched across the motionless forest, a streaked belt of opalescent light.

A June night at Russja-Kaja. . . .

Russja-Kaja dreaming of her fairies.

A transparent darkness shutting in the old house on every side.

And if you, a wanderer, come thus by chance face to face with the great house, seeing her, for the first time, under friendly conditions, you could not fail to be impressed by her noble proportions.

Fair and square she stands, on a gentle slope, her west front facing the Broad Walk.

All around stretches the great park ; facing her south front, are the avenue of limes and the artificial lake.

Three terraces lead down to the kitchen gardens—the rose terrace, the lilac terrace, and the mixed terrace ; on the lower rung nature runs wild—honeysuckles compete with jessamine, poppies, and wild larkspur ; a tangle of hops thrives cheek by jowl with scarlet-runners—no order on the lower terrace, but much beauty, a colour scheme altogether natural. McArthur scorns the lower terrace.

The lilacs have it all their own way on the middle rung. During the course of many years the trees have grown powerfully strong and tall ; in the lilac season they are just one mass of mauve and white—massed blooms waving up to heaven a message of delight. The lower branches are sometimes interfered with. We gather them in great handfuls, and McArthur dearly loves to prune them, but the uppermost branches live unto themselves and talk amongst themselves and praise life from a higher standpoint.

The last terrace, touching the walls of the old house, is given over to Anna Nicolajevna's famous roses—roses red and roses white, and all the intermediate shades, not all of passing quality, but all of rare virtue.

A pretty enough frame to the old house.

Only a prig would look out for the broken terrace steps,

or notice the condition of the balustrades and the stone vases.

The extravagant Count must have been entirely careless, or the years which came after him extraordinarily severe—the dead years, the quiet years, the years when the great house was shut up, and when the statues looked up to the voiceless stars and wondered.

Sometimes I cannot think of that time without shivering. Russja-Kaja does so love company, and happy voices, and incessant doing. Fancy those dear old lilac trees wasting their sweetness on the unappreciative honeysuckles and on the equally callous Scotch roses. All beauties are said to despise each other.

The poor old sightless house—shuttered and silent, a forsaken home. Ah, well, she got her own again. The mists always lift.

The old mansion is a low, rambling building, built with a two-storied centre-piece, and two great wings stretching out on either side. At the back, at right angles, are the kitchen premises, a theatre, and a glass-roofed winter-garden—all planned on a generous scale.

Every century has seen some additions to the house. The extravagant Count built the theatre ; his predecessor was accountable for the winter-garden and the great kitchens—such a vast place.

Even in the grounds we can trace where one man left off and where another man commenced the improvements. Russja-Kaja is not a place kept up by one man and a boy. It would pay for proper attention ; furbish her up a bit, set her fountains going ; dig out the overgrown beds, cart about a few tropical palms and brilliant bedding-out plants, cut, weed, and water, and even McArthur would be bound to praise St. Nicholas.

I wish the house were, as far as her outside appearance

is concerned, in a fairer condition. To put it frankly, she is crying out for a new coat of paint ; really, plaster has no better wear than the flimsiest chiffon ; I am afraid an unbiased observer would call the house dilapidated.

I have given away the secret.

Take it kindly if I introduce you by night ; semi-darkness is such a happy covering to decay, and it is a complete cure for unsightly patches and slithering plaster.

Not that we see any fault in the house ; in our eyes she is charming. We love her.

The roof is the pride of our mother's heart. Without that tremendously solid piece of workmanship we would be in a bad way. The extravagant Count added the iron roof to his last list of expenditure—it must have cost a good bit of money, but it was worth it ! A rain-proof roof ; just think what it means to an impoverished household. If the roof wants a new coat of paint she gets it—sure as sin ! It would be a sin to be economical and spoil our grandfather's extravagancy ; rust is a corroding enemy to iron, and we wisely keep them apart.

Once, figuratively speaking, the new winter dresses of the entire family lay on the roof, as well as a figure off the price of the American mangle. We had to make the old mangle do, though it was broken, and we went to church in dresses cleaned and turned. Only Mademoiselle Cleo sniffed at the freshly painted iron roof, and said it was a waste of money. She just hates turning dresses.

If only our dear grandpapa had been a shade less extravagant !

The idea of building a bungalow only to house his theatrical company, adding fifty stalls to his already opulent stables, and running up a theatre just for the pleasure of the thing ! He might have realised that Reforms were pending.

Decidedly he rose above politics.

It is said that on that memorable day when he gathered his serfs around him, every soul in his possession, in the big courtyard, and informed them that henceforth they were free men and women, a sustained howl rent the air—a howl of anguish.

‘Keep us, good father !’ cried his ‘children.’ The old Count dismissed them with streaming eyes. He was a susceptible old man, my grandfather.

I suppose he must have felt the disbandment of his theatrical troupe, of his private band, and the desolation of Minerva and Apollo and Venus and Mercury.

The old house is still beautiful.

Given a favourable light, no one but a cat could discern that the white paint is deplorably grey, that the plaster is falling in places and has fallen in others, that decades have passed since the serfs gathered together in the great courtyard and wept at the promulgation of a humane law. Decades of rain and snow have left their visible traces on every side of the rambling mansion. When the wind, in autumn, blows over the *stepes*, it catches her full in the face, and climbs on to the roof, and sweeps round the flag-post, and crawls down the walls, and does a terror of mischief to the remaining plaster. And, if the wind is accompanied by a storm of hail and rain, it is as if a thousand feet were beating against the house—giant feet, and not the feet of flies.

Tante Katja hates a storm. She always lays down her tatting when the wind is howling and crosses herself.

She is thinking of the sea. The sea never forgets her due. The sea took toll of tante Katja’s wealth. The sea left her loverless.

Every time the wind hurls itself against the old house, and rattles the seven great windows of the saloon, where we generally sit, tante Katja is reminded of her loss.

When we notice that she is sunk in profound thought, and has not heard one word of uncle Hyppolyth's story, we either leave her to herself or Anne Nicolajevna beckons to one of us—Vera, if she is at home—and Vera walks softly down the parquet flooring of the big room, and we know that when she returns it will either be apples or nuts or negus.

Tante Katja is not greedy, but she likes a little unexpected refreshment. We all like it.

Then, very probably, Anna Nicolajevna will play us something; uncle Hyppolyth will gravely turn over the sheet of music, counting it an honour. My mother can never remember the next bar without her notes, and even then she sometimes makes a hash of it. We like to hear her play, she does it with such hearty goodwill, putting a great deal of expression into her face and very little into her music.

Uncle Hyppolyth, who is a finished musician, enjoys listening to Anna Nicolajevna, which only shows what a hold she has on his heart. He enjoys her loud waltzes, her spirited galops, and even her sentimental pieces, which have a habit of breaking up.

The flickering candle-light plays on both their faces, and his looks like a piece of carved ivory, and hers like the face of a beautiful woman in her prime.

We can never remember that mother is getting old, and that she is very stout. Nothing matters with mother—weight, or dress, or music—some people live by their hearts and not by their acquirements.

Mother understands us. I assure you her thumping waltzes are most effectual. After ten bars she succeeds in obliterating the storm. We none of us listen to the hurtling gale—we none of us care. It is so cosy in the big, dim, draughty saloon. Our two little oil-lamps might well be

the electric display of a royal court, and our party the wittiest in Europe.

Thump—thump—thump ! and on she plays with dear conviction and sound pleasure. Except for two bright fever spots on dear tante Katja's withered cheeks, no one would suspect that the gale was playing havoc with hollow trees and old plaster, and ancient memories.

Once, last autumn, when an ominous crack sounded to the north of the house, the worm-eaten birch tree—such a monster—was torn up by her roots and fell on the pagoda.

We all shivered. The grand-piano was silent.

'It is life,' said Anna Nicolajevna pleasantly, 'and how good God is—it might have fallen and crushed the fowl-house.'

The fowl-house, which contains the eggs and the poultry of our diminished establishment, was mercifully spared. Had not a north wind clapped in and fought with the east wind all the hens might have been stretched low. It does not bear thinking upon.

Yet, why should I picture a sad scene ? I want you to meet the old house under her best auspices. We will just box up the tales of storm and stress, and let the heavenly June night circle around, like scented plumes of gauzy shade.

Follow me, dear, up the Broad Walk, when a vague light trembles in the distance, lending enchantment to our home.

Russja-Kaja is always a place of generous spaces, but come upon her suddenly, a tranquil summer night, and her immense proportions will startle you.

Everything has grown : the great courtyard has widened out, the trees have stretched beyond the limit of trees, the countless paths, in park and garden, are broad and wide ; and the great house is impressive, desolate, and grand.

A mere human being feels his own limitation and, perhaps, a sudden thrill of fear.

The intense silence is fraught with magic. Melancholy sits enthroned in the eerie park and in the enchanted mansion.

The poor, plastered Corinthian pillars, approached by a flight of wide steps leading to the great entrance door, seem incredibly massive and dignified.

Seen through the curtain of night, which is no night, the old home is very beautiful ; a place to live in and to die in.

For us it is no illusion. When the broad light discovers all her faults we still can find her charming.

If your imagination cannot quicken your perception, steal away across the river before the break of dawn.

You will not lose your way.

In June, at midnight, at Russja-Kaja, you could pick a bunch of cowslips by the darkest meadow bank, and distinguish each belled flower, and not tumble into the ditch.

Sometimes, passing by the deserted theatre, you will hear the sound of violins and the light patter of dancing feet.

A tangled hedge of overgrown roses quite hides the stage door. No one has used it for ever so long . . . except the little people. Many a moonlit night they crowd through the locked stage door, whispering, murmuring, laughing, stepping aside, bowing—oh, their manners are gracious !

Some silly fools, clothed in flesh, refuse to pass the locked stage door when the moon is drifting over the river —don't they lose a lot ! I am afraid human flesh is heir to many things besides death—a little ounce of nervousness, here and there ; a little whimpering cry. ‘ I am so terrified . . . do you hear them singing, stamping, clap-

ping, shouting ? and there is nobody inside ! I have looked through the keyhole. That awful theatre is empty. Oh, come away—pray come away !'

A wraith flutters past a nervous lady, and smiles. ' You will come inside one day, dear lady,' she whispers. She drops her a pasteboard—only the petal of a white rose—and the moon sails majestically over the giant elms.

Come away.

The garden front is lovely, so sunshiny—we have slipped a few hours off the chain of life—so homely, so utterly void of ghosts.

Life dwells in the old garden. Life riots on the lower terrace. The flowers, which come up year by year, are nearly all of everlasting wear. Anyhow, they will outlast our time. The narcissus, the forget-me-nots, the poppies, the wild hyacinths, the white phlox, and the perennial ox-eyed daisies—hardy as Siberian pines.

Not a bad place to encounter the sun.

If you like more shade climb a step. I warrant you the lilac trees, for all their grateful shadow, harbour no ghosts. Ghosts evidently do not approve of the scent of lilac—they never forgather on the terrace in the blossoming season. If you see them floating past at any time, take heart of comfort—it is only an optical delusion.

Years and years and years ago a man, before he turned into a spirit, planted on the middle terrace an abundance of little lilac trees—he liked them white, but he preferred them purple. They took to the soil, these little striplings—they are still growing, they are still full of scented sprays, full of wonderful blossom, and if, here and there, there is a gap in their ranks, interlacing branches hide the fact.

All the old trees are friends ; together they have weathered many a storm and faced many a spring.

The poetry of the old lilac trees is very apparent.

CHAPTER X

A PAGE OF HISTORY AND A GHOST OR TWO

I HAVE told you so much about the outside of the house, I have gathered great bunches of roses and lilac and held them towards you and bidden you gather them to your heart—that it would not be reasonable to you, as to the house, if I refused to take you inside.

You want to come, do you not ?

If you would rather stay outside in the sunshine, the brilliant morning sunshine, and dream of yesternight, I will not hinder you. Shut the door of this little chapter and do not follow me across the threshold.

Are you undecided ? can my will-o'-the-wisp pen induce you to enter ? After all, it costs you nothing except a passing compliment to myself. I tell you honestly, I was born to develop into a dear old housekeeper, in black silk and jingling keys—I do love showing people over the premises and growing rather garrulous about it too. Those in doubt—stay outside !

The charm of an old house lies in her livable quality.

Each passing generation leaves her impression on the home of a family. Each piece of ancient furniture speaks of the dead to the living. Youth is perpetually with us, and the babies carry the fresh garlands of the present into the shadowy future. Who can know of days to come ? Only dreams, mothers' dreams, float round the babies' uncertain footsteps, dreams tinged with every loving hope and sure

foreboding. Lives there a mother who does not expect her child to meet and to hold a very lasting joy ?

And the old house looks on and smiles at all our day-dreams. Could the silent rooms speak—the rooms teeming with memory—we would but have an added record to life's everlasting renewal. The old, old story—the old, old march. . . . Sometimes it is as if an invisible presence strikes up the stirring chords, and it is as if the old house were given the secret of hidden tongues—as if the old house were allowed to speak !

How much better she would do it than I can ! How mellow would her words be—how sound and good—how true ! For the old house has captivated all the tears and all the joys, all the stress and all the laughter—not of days or of years, but of centuries !

I want you to follow me up the shallow staircase to the upper story. We will work down presently. Let us begin with the little apartment—a quaint file of low-pitched rooms, so old-fashioned that they are almost antique, and so quiet that they are almost oppressive.

The little rooms have long been left practically alone ; they have the reputation of being haunted, and Anna Nicolajevna has handed them over to superstition.

During the latter part of his life these rooms were the chosen quarters of my grandfather, the extravagant Count. What an odd taste he had, to retreat to these little rooms—five all told, and not one of a decent size—when, downstairs, he had the pick of the house. Fine rooms downstairs, lofty and wide and suitable to his extravagance—gilding and old brocade and crystal chandeliers and Venetian mirrors and cunningly inlaid chests—he did himself well.

Probably he was much of a true man and loved a change. And after the music and the talk and the never-ceasing

compliments downstairs, it pleased him to mount one flight of rather narrow stairs, strike across a garret of a loft, and take hold of quiet.

No one disturbed him upstairs.

And he and his modest furniture, they agreed to like each other. It was like stepping into another world, a modest little world of flowered dimity and rag carpets and homely pictures—a haven of simplicity.

The very library with its few books, striped wall-papers, and green rep furnishings looks like a cottage room. No splendour here, but for all that an attractive interior. It must have been attractive when the old Count sat by the open window, a newspaper on the table beside him, and maybe a pot of tulips in the old Wedgwood jar.

Poor old deserted library ! One day I will gather a great bunch of sweet-peas and place them all in the Wedgwood jar, and open wide the windows to my guests—sun and air—and invite them into the extravagant Count's favourite sitting-room. The old room will be so pleased, and look round for the ghosts, and, if they have retired in a fit of shyness, she will tell them all about it later on.

Sometimes, sitting in the saloon below, we are startled by a sudden thump over our heads. It may be an old chest creaking, a misguided bat come down the chimney, or the ubiquitous ghost. Anyhow, it is more thrilling to credit the ghost, and we leave it at that, not by so many words but by silent consent.

The little apartment is reached by way of a lumber-room, or rather a great loft, a very treasure-house of odds and ends ; old cupboards, old chests—crammed—frightful pictures. There is a battle scene, a huge canvas where every upright corpse seems to carry his own bloody head, and where the dead men on the field are white as sheets of calico—smoking cannon in the distance, and a sunset to

match the brilliant uniforms. We often wonder who painted it ; an unsigned work of art.

On a high shelf, birds of prey, eagles, and owls, and stranger beasts, perch in stuffed blessedness together—rather a dusty lot and rather a forlorn crew. Sometimes their glassy eyes seem to follow you, picking your way across the loft.

Everything not required or too good to be thrown away is stored in the loft—a marvellously elastic place, with deep eaves and hidden corners and great rafters and a fine old draught for ever tinkering the crevices.

When the wind rattles the iron roof the old furniture creaks and groans as much as to say, ‘This is a fate beggaring description.’ It must be a hardship to a well-conditioned sofa or a proper chest to be housed away as derelict owing to a freak of fashion.

The furniture has moved very slowly in our times. In fact, Anna Nicolajevna regards a broken spring, a tarnished mirror, a faded curtain as very minor details ; the old things must remain in default of better.

Now and again we talk of refurnishing a room ; we are sick at the sight of dingy brocade, and trip willingly into the holes of a threadbare carpet, all the more forcibly to remind us of the necessity of spending money.

When Vera married, I rather fancy the contents of the Blue Room trembled and put the question plainly—‘What ! are the wall-papers to go, the carpet, the twelve arm-chairs all of a pattern, the fire-screen dated 1760, the family ottoman—the beautiful family ottoman—the two settees by the door ?—What !’

They must have had a sad fright until a passing breeze pacified them. ‘Don’t be alarmed, my dears,’ whispered the breeze to the creaking furniture. ‘You will do.’ When Vera married, Countess Sylvia’s own sitting-room was

threatened—and not a chair has been replaced. Human beings love to make plans, and they do not seem to mind if they never are realised—‘Funds, funds, funds,’ sighed the breeze, and flew out of the window on the friendly wings of this parting hint. And the ancient furniture moved a unanimous vote of thanks to the breeze, and quite wantonly courted the sunshine on their soiled seats. Dirt will happen, do what you will ; even dirty brocade is better than fresh chintz. We none of us love the petticoated ideas of English drawing-rooms—excellent for preservation, but in appearance they must suggest the overalls of a linen cupboard or a little girl’s pinafore. No polite little girl wears her pinafore when she comes down to the drawing-room. Our furniture, though faded, and distinctly frayed in places, has preserved its original lines and its polite manners—it has never condescended to loose covers.

Such is the utter strangeness of life. Only the other day our mother declared that, hidden away in the loft, were treasures ! More than that, she said she would have them brought down and given a new lease of life.

I only hope the old furniture did not hear her remarks, which would have been sure to instil in them an envious spirit and much expectation. Each separate piece, under its dusty covering, would have groaned and asked, ‘Will I be the chosen object ? Am I worthy a new lease of admiration ? . . . O for a grand illumination ! . . . O for the music of many voices ! . . . ’

And very probably the great white owl would have turned his glassy eyes on these vanitous pieces and reproved them. ‘Females every one of them,’ he would have said, which would not have been true, because furniture is sexless.

Everything is undeniably dusty in the loft. No one has a hundred hands or, at that, a hundred eyes. Reduced

circumstances must accept a pair of blinkers from a hard fate ; a kind spirit can always fashion them rose-coloured.

Life is full of consolation.

In the little apartment the dust is never allowed to intrude—everything is kept in a spotless condition. If it means an extra hard day's work no servant complains ; by mutual understanding they wish to carry out Anna Nicolajevna's orders, and maybe, by mistaken kindness, to propitiate the ghosts. Ghosts do not like a turn-out, I can tell you.

Once a week the windows are flung open in the little apartment and a great cleaning goes on. And if the sun is up and about she floods the little rooms in the twinkling of an eye, driving before her all sense of mustiness and closeness : she kisses the old portraits and the black-framed copperplates ; she flings her light into the dark corners ; she plays on the surface of the mahogany furniture, and yesterday she carried on her delicious wings the breath of living roses.

The poor old ghosts, how they hate the intruders !

'Leave us to the dust and to the twilight ; kindly close the windows and draw the blinds,' they sigh. 'Leave us the old Count's whist-table, the use of his comfortable sofa, and his old pack of pleasure. We are a most orderly company—we will not disturb you. . . .'

They could not put it nicer.

As if a charwoman or a conscientious housemaid ever listened even to the politest ghost alive ! They have not the heart to understand or the ears to hear. More than likely they will dust the very chair a spectre has chosen for his own—pass their feather brooms over his face and rub down his silver buttons with a paraffin rag. Their only excuse being—that Mr. the Ghost, silver buttons and all, is quite invisible in the broad daylight.

At night it is very different ; at night, when the windows are shut, the blue curtains drawn, the humans away, a phosphorous light invades the little apartment, and each ghost, gathered round the old Count's whist-table, can at ease look at his flimsy cards.

Would you not like to take a peep through the keyhole ?
There are many valuables kept upstairs.

On my grandfather's writing-table you will find a morocco case lined with crimson velvet, enclosing a sound and tremendously large double tooth.

Tradition has it that once, at the expense of an unfortunate subject's physical discomfort, that tooth gleamed in a pair of Imperial pincers !

Peter the Great loved to extract teeth ; he preferred them strong, as they gave him more trouble.

Close to the historical tooth you will find a roughly carved model of a rowing-boat, also the work of Peter's hands. He fashioned it one morning at Russja-Kaja and presented it to the children of the house, who probably were told to look and not touch, and who thought it a stupid present. Fancy getting a toy too sacred to touch ! I can fancy their feelings.

If the old walls could speak !

Uncle Hyppolyth is the next best authority. His memory can go back a very long way. As a young man he often enjoyed the hospitality of the extravagant Count.

Such hospitality ! Our ears, tuned to lesser deeds, cannot always accept the truth of these stories. Age forgets, age embroiders, and an artist has always his colour-box to hand.

Would that the old house could speak !

Maybe she would round on us thoroughly. 'Listen, children,' she would say, 'uncle Hyppolyth is a liar ! Not half of his tale is true—he impoverishes the glorious truth ; age forgets, and colours grow dim.'

'Here in the little saloon thirty young people used to be put up—we had to sleep them somewhere; they loved crowding together—such a chirping and such a whispering as went on before those giddy young girls finally fell asleep; often they would talk half through the night—keeping me awake. . . . A pretty enough sight they made—thirty flower faces side by side on a generous space of bedding, placed on the centre of the floor, for fear of draughts, heaped with coloured quilts, and some of them silk, blues and pinks and reds, flowered and plain. What a tumbled bed it was, and what joy it gave them! . . . There is nothing like youth. . . .'

As if we did not know it!

Uncle Hyppolyth tells us that the young men of the party were no less crowded—sometimes they were even put off with a hayloft.

In the early hours of the morning they would all go, running and shouting, down the Broad Walk, to seek their much-needed rest. A whole party of them, as wild a set of madcaps as you could find. The extravagant Count loved extravagant spirits, and the shining lights of the house were all mischievous.

Cannot you see the young dandies, in the warm summer night, climbing the rickety ladder to the old barn, tripping each other up, and singing snatches of some popular melody? You can bet it was a love song, or a drinking song, or a French chansonnette, not rehearsed before the glorious thirty.

The young lady visitors at Russja-Kaja were all beauties of the first order, accomplished creatures, and graceful enough to turn a fawn sick with envy.

Uncle Hyppolyth waxes very eloquent over the young ladies.

And even uncle Dimitri will say the same. They never

consider it an extravagance to pay a pretty woman a compliment.

Sitting in the old saloon at night, we seem to hear the music of other days, the flying footsteps of the young beauties, and the hearty approval of the extravagant Count.

He kept open house.

He kept fifty carriage horses ; and sometimes the poor beasts were sadly overworked. The carrying and the fetching, the picnics, and the big shoots—what a sum they made !

‘True, most true,’ sighs the forsaken theatre. ‘Every evening I welcomed a charming party, and the players did me justice. Dear Mademoiselle Marie—what a voice she had ! An inspired creature with languishing eyes and flowing ringlets. The old Count paid her extraordinary attention and a most handsome salary. Sometimes I trembled at the applause which shook me—such an enthusiastic stamping crowd ! The lights dazzled me. The violins answered rapturously, stroked by the hands of lovers—no musician is worthy his name if he is not in love with his music. Our band was composed of picked instrumentalists. You ought to have seen my new gilt chairs, upholstered in red velvet—delightful in every sense. And my dear little boxes, stowed away in the corners, where the very fat ladies would fall asleep, in spite of the attractions offered them. . . . Such a perfect little theatre. . . .’

Poor dear little bumptious playhouse—the toy of a spendthrift nobleman. I can hear her flute-like voice quavering in the distance.

The sounds are pouring in around. To-night there is music in the old house—the music of vibrating memory.

Follow me through the big reception-rooms, down the long corridors. Open the big swing door to the left. . . . What a noise and what a hubbub ! Where have we happened ?

I want to show you the great kitchens. Look at those monster copper utensils—all over a hundred years old—and the clumsy ovens, and the flagged floors.

Imagine the scullion domains, the washhouse, the bakehouse, the brewery, the candle factory. Think of the cellars below and the great overflowing casks, and everywhere a jostling crowd of servants.

How everyone is jabbering! The heat of the ovens is at furnace point. The extravagant Count is very particular about his food.

Hurry, scullions! Make haste, slothful wenches! There is no doubt about it, the French *chef* is losing his temper. See him pushing his way through the crowd—‘*tonner de Dieu!*’ The furnace is glowing and roaring—the great roast will surely burn !’

Look to the left: a dainty maid is forcing her way through the sweltering crowd, carrying in her dainty hand a cup of steaming chocolate, her lady’s midday refreshment. . . . The *chef* catches sight of her pretty face and gallantly smiles. . . . Once again every minion in the place breathes freely. . . .

Only flashlight pictures, taken at random—living pictures of bygone days. . . .

Our mother has accepted the trust given her.

The true spirit of hospitality still remains with us. Sometimes, in the still watches of the night, it seems to me as if the present and the past joined hands and met as friends.

Sleep, old house—sleep! We will keep your tradition unsullied and your memory green.

CHAPTER XI

A PERFECTLY TRUE STORY

THE shutters are closed in the big kitchen ; no echoing footsteps resound on its flagged floors ; the monstrous ovens are very cold ; a fine layer of dust dims the lustre of the red-gold coppers, and if a mouse, scared out of his hole, scampers across the floor, he frightens no one but himself.

Anna Nicolajevna is satisfied with the resources of the private kitchen, a much smaller place, and formerly sacred to the confectioner's art—a dainty white-faced room, with tall windows set to the east facing a hedge of white rambler roses, representing the poetry of the table.

Further advantages include a small oven of shining steel facets, with quite a moderate appetite for dry logs of crackling wood. We do all our stoking with wood. The forests do not seem to complain, and many a windfall has saved the woodman's axe.

A dainty little kitchen, smelling of spice and sugar and all that is nice.

There is a niche in the wall, giving directly upon a long passage-way, which connects the kitchen with the dining-room. A niche furnished with a sliding panel of a most practical size ; you could pass a lady's hat through it, one of Vera's Paris creations, all feathers and fluffery, and not imperil a single plume.

It had to be cut according to the dishes. Such great

dishes, which have in their time passed out through the convenient panel, and down the gloomy passage ! Ices of cunning design, towering under billows of spun sugar ; cakes—yards round—all pink and cream, with fancy letterings and piped borders ; *soufflés* whiter than the snows of Mont Blanc, and not nearly so lasting.

Have we not just sucked down the fame of our grandfather's dinners ? I assure you, at times, the dead-and-gone confectioner lends to our more homely and substantial fare a whiff of Imperial Tokay, or any other costly delicacy.

Our rice-moulds and sago-soups come to the table fit to set before a king. (King or no king, they always taste well.)

Here we have again to rely on uncle Hyppolyth's memory. We do it *con amore*. Some of his stories are fine, and worth the re-telling.

Shut your eyes and listen.

Whir—whir—whir ! The springs of time are revolving fast. Stop the clock ! We have got where we want to—there is nothing so odious as to miss your station, when the guard gives you one minute to alight.

A dinner-party. What a merry-looking party. Just a trifle overheated—eh ? If you will come in at the end of a dinner of fourteen courses, and wines to match, you cannot expect a North Pole aspect of two shivering men over tinned beans and pork.

The lights are flaring high in the massive candelabra, though it is August and quite light outside, and quite early in the afternoon—somewhere about five o'clock, I fancy. Can you not consume fourteen courses in two and a half hours if you are quick about it, and share a footman with, say, two others ? I have never tried, but I imagine it is quite feasible.

I am convinced the lovely young ladies welcomed the sight of the Sweet, fresh from the hands of the creator, with

undistinguished approval. Fourteen courses is all very well for our dear mammas, but sweet seventeen is apt to look at them askance, a sad handicap on the dance to follow. I expect thirty pair of neat feet were beating, waltz time, beneath the table, some little while ago. . . .

The extravagant Count always supplied music to set off his feasts and his guests' tongues.

Up in the musicians' gallery a fine programme has been gone through, and I expect the poor fellows, fiddling through fourteen courses, spied the Sweet with even greater satisfaction than the young people; warm work playing up to all that talk. . . .

There is compensation ahead.

The crumbs on the extravagant Count's table were well worth the picking.

Each perspiring musician, wiping his bow on his apple-green sleeve—trimmed with gold lace—felt his time was coming.

When the pears were a-peeling they almost felt kindly disposed to the crowd downstairs, suffered their wagging tongues, their peals of laughter, their last compliments, and, easiest of all, the scraping of their chairs across the shining parquet floor, as the company rose to leave the room.

Peering down from the gallery, the perspiring and hungry musicians watched with complete satisfaction their noble patron lead the way through the great folding-doors, with the leading lady clinging to his arm.

In an incredibly short time the dining-room emptied, and the last flutter of the youngest lady's sash disappeared in the wake of a pink silk dress; growing mercifully less audible, the echoing voices of the shrillest young ladies lost themselves in the great saloons. . . .

The musicians scrambled down from the gallery, helter-

skelter, without any sense of precedence. The footmen made haste to swallow the wine left over from the banquet. The bandmaster whisked in front of his fellows, and clutched the major-domo's portly arm—he a lean fellow, the other puffed with beer and pride—eyeing the side-table, still set out with a tempting cold collation.

'Out on you, good fellow,' stammered the perplexed bandmaster; 'I miss the *caviar* and the crisp toast. Ivan Ivanovitch, son of a hero, my blessings on your future family—if you smack up a kitchen wench and set the bellows blowing' (passing his practised eye across the table). 'Oh, for a draught of honest Burgundy! My tongue is blacker than a hearse and drier than caustic wit.'

The major-domo placed his big fat hands on his fat hips and laughed so loud and long that a young footman, two steps behind, dropped his glass—a nasty mess on the cloth—and hastily crossed himself. Pious youth, he was half afraid such a laugh might waken the dead. 'St. Isaac and all saints, protect us. . . .'

The bandmaster was far too hungry to appreciate the fat fellow's joke. He, with a blank expression, swallowed smoked eel and mushroom ketchup, while the story unfolded itself.

'There he stood, in the great doorway, facing the kitchen, a holy man of God; the wind caught his straggling beard and flapped his lean sack over his broad shoulder.

"God's peace with you, children," said the holy man.

"God's peace with you, friar, and may the dust never cling to your feet," came the answering chorus.

"Allez vous en," the French *chef* cried, waving a red-hot gridiron in the face of the begging friar.

I left him planted in the centre of the kitchen, his empty sack flapping drearily on his broad back.

"Milles diables!" called the French cook. "Are you never going?" This to—ME!

So I whipped up my stuffed pheasants and led the way, followed by my men.'

Another deep laugh shook the nerves of the young footman.

The major-domo, the better to catch his breath and to appreciate his little joke, shut his mouth with a snap.

The bandmaster had turned to salmon-pasties, and opened a bottle of beer.

'When I returned for the next course, iced asparagus, I found the holy man seated in front of the *caviar*—'

'Ha!' snarled the bandmaster, waking up.

—'Washing it down with copious draughts of your Burgundy, your especial brand, white and sparkling—'

'The villain!'

'The saint! Little Natalie filling his huge sacks, as fast as ever she could stuff it, with bread and fowls, a fine sturgeon, garnished up to his eyes, whole and luscious, except for a jagged slice carved off his shoulders and now reposing in his Excellency's most excellent stomach. And he—the man of God—far too busy munching to get up and thank me—'

'Of all vain fools—'

'Softly, my man. Did I not with my own hands carry out the *caviar* and set it down conveniently for my friends? I have a heart, a great heart, a noble heart! The sight of it all sliding down his fat throat was pure comedy—pure comedy.'

The major-domo whisked round, and tickled the bandmaster behind his left ear, whispering, 'A nice stone jar of your favourite relish did not wander into that spacious paunch; it is at your disposal, Alexander Alexandrovitch, if you will play to me to-night.'

'The fool ! Play !' Every finger is weighted with lead. I am dog-tired. I cannot relish my food.'

The major-domo snatched a soup-plate, and hurried, light as a cork ball, to a steaming bowl, just brought in and set upon the long table.

'Try it, my dear friend,' he suggested, coaxing the bandmaster into a seat and placing before him a fine portion of the savoury mess ; 'the best *borsch* ever made, floating with sausages and waves of sour cream—a dream !'

The bandmaster was prevailed upon to begin his dinner.

The major-domo was called away. An anxious footman disturbed the conference and the bandmaster looked lovingly at him. Some men prefer to feed in peace.

When his friend returned the bandmaster was at the roast—venison done to a turn.

The major-domo tripped round him much as an ingratiating coquette ; there was something at the back of his mind, and, deftly snuffing a candle, he returned to the charge.

'Then sing, my friend,' he pleaded, 'sing to us if your poor fingers are really too stiff to play, though there is nothing like work for keeping them pliable. They have a little affair on to-night,' jerking his head towards the great saloon. 'They are going to dispense with you—until later ; courting by moonlight, if she comes up, and flirting in the grove of statues if she is sulky. In any case I and my select friends will wait on you, and will expect you at ten o'clock in the Swiss chalet. . . . She loves the gipsy airs ; your voice brings tears to her beautiful eyes ; and I can have the great privilege of kissing them away when no one is looking our way.'

The fat major-domo gave a little ecstatic laugh—a most amorous fellow. 'A living, breathing romance,' he echoed on the tail of a dutiful sigh.

The bandmaster nodded. His whole mouth was occupied by a sugared plum. Before he spit out the stone he nodded again.

The major-domo beamed, broadly, as a full moon.

When the bandmaster had got rid of the plum he spoke :
‘The dinner was excellent, Ivan Ivanovitch ; I will sing.’

The major-domo rapped the long table so that all the glasses jingled.

‘Here !’ he called wildly, ‘bring the Sweet along !’

And the bandmaster stretched his lean arm across the table, and helped himself to a toothpick. . . .

That is exactly how uncle Hyppolyth tells the story of the Begging Friar.

Tante Katja considers the big dining-room the least agreeable room at Russja-Kaja.

In fact, we very seldom use it ; it is kept for our weddings and our most important parties.

Habitually we squeeze ourselves into the little dining-room—not a very large room this, nor much to boast of in the way of ventilation. It is a square room, with a round table on the centre of the drugget, decorated with three monster hunting scenes on the walls—oleographs as large as life—I believe they hark back to London, in the time of the early Georges ; they are ugly, but distinctly original.

Two French windows open on to the verandah.

In summer, of course, we eat all our meals in the open air—so nice and fresh. The English governess can have nothing to complain of.

Sometimes she objects to the stuffiness of the little dining-room, and I have heard her, in an audible whisper, ask the twins to open the window. They have wisely never taken any notice of her heightened colour. Open windows, in winter, are most dangerous. Besides, we all know that

uncle Hyppolyth suffers from a delicate chest, and that tante Katja is practically delicate all over.

Poor darling, even her nerves are not what they used to be!

Last autumn, when we were having supper in the big dining-room (no important party; but the little dining-room was having her double windows fixed—always a lengthy affair—and thick curtains put up, and the sweep had not finished with her great stove), tante Katja, tapping her first boiled egg, put her spoon down suddenly. We thought she had hit upon a nest-egg—but she declared she was turning faint, because there, in the right-hand corner of the musicians' gallery, she saw the lean bandmaster leaning well over the balustrade.

It gave us all a turn.

We all looked up and we saw nothing.

Anna Nicolajevna pacified tante Katja by promising her that it should never happen again.

She readjusted tante Katja's black knitted shawl, which had slipped from off her shoulders.

'There, dear,' she said. 'I hope you are not cold.'

Anna Nicolajevna never suffers from cold herself, she is always warm and comfortable, and her big, fine hands never turn blue or red. In summer they are apt to brown; then she looks at them with a whimsical expression and shifts her turquoise rings, discarding them for her emeralds; green and brown is a colour-scheme which appeals to her. Funny how our mother is convinced she can be trusted with colours, and still more odd that we all agree with her, in the teeth of discord.

Tante Katja finished her egg and sugared her tea.

Uncle Dimitri handed her the sugar-basin, and blandly asked mother how she was going to keep the bandmaster in order.

Anna Nicolajevna flashed him a glance of serious contempt.

'Men are so stupid,' she said finally, stroking tante Katja's cold fingers. 'You understand, dear tante?—you shall take a drop of brandy to-night—the last thing in bed in something hot. We will never sit here again.' She shivered. 'I feel the cold; the very sight of those great white stoves upsets one.' It is ludicrous how that poor little lamp tries to look important. Kasimir, fetch a match—thank you, dear Hyppolyth—and light the candles in the chandelier. . . . Not all! The foolish boy—blow them out! Leave the six in the top row so they burn evenly. I can't abide the sight of candles at sixes and sevens. . . .'

The six candles only succeeded in lighting up the gloom. The big dining-room is such a very large room.

CHAPTER XII

WE CHEAT. AND ANOTHER PERFECTLY TRUE STORY

THE whole party of us, except the old ladies, were moored up in boats by the river-bank—a business-like, silent party intent on fishing blue-scaled trout.

The afternoon was pretty far gone before we actually started work.. We wanted to give the trout no opportunity of escape—they relish fat worms at sunset ; I expect they do look toothsome beneath the water, tinged with opal lights, and in the darkness a fish has not the courage to evade a nibble if a tempting dish bars his progress.

‘Don’t splash !’ called Olga from the next boat but one to ours. ‘I am having the most awful bad luck.’

Kasimir unhooked a fine trout, dashed its head against a board, and flung it adroitly into a pail. ‘What can you expect,’ said he in withering sarcasm, ‘if you will carry lanterns in your cars ? In your place I would stick one in my nose and wear more rings.’

Olga laughed rather shamefacedly. The fact is she loves jewellery. I suppose if you marry at seventeen, and up till then have never possessed more glittering ornaments than a coral necklace and a gold bangle, you would fancy single brilliant earrings, fat as cobnuts, and said to be worth a king’s ransom.

Every time Paul Iljevitch fetches out a small packet from the pocket of his ample waistcoat (Paul is inclined

to corpulence) Olga unfastens it with childish delight. ‘Guns’ is desperately rich. Soon Olga will look as a very precious ikon.¹

‘Oh!’ said Olga, shaking her small head. ‘I quite forgot my earrings. Here, Paul, there is a darling—catch!’

Paul was smoking on the bank and pretending to watch us. He was lying in a very easy attitude. He just turned over a trifle to grab at the diamonds Olga rather neatly aimed at his nose. He slipped them into a pocket and continued smoking.

‘There now,’ said Olga, ‘you have not a shadow of an excuse to be nasty.’

Kasimir looked at his sister’s wet fingers and whistled. Olga is always taking the temperature of the water when she is fishing. No one knows why she does it; she says it is pleasant.

Olga swished her rod a yard farther out; she stamped her foot. ‘The fishes cannot possibly notice my hands,’ she said.

At this Anthony laughed. ‘Why, it is as good as a play, little Olga plying for fish and crying over her own good fortune. Your rings are quite good, cousin.’

‘I will throw them into the river.’

‘Do stop chattering,’ said Vera. ‘How can you possibly expect a nap, making all that noise? Olga, we will throw you into the river if you say another word.’

Olga laughed. ‘I know,’ she whispered, stepping carefully, and stretching over to the next boat, she put her hand into uncle Dimitri’s coat-pocket and took out a pair of enormous grey reindeer gloves; these she promptly slipped on her own fingers and waved her monstrous hands in the air. ‘Look,’ he breathed, ‘Paul—look! ’

He sat up and took his cigar out of his mouth. ‘Lovely,’

¹ Ikons are the holy pictures of the Greek Church. According to their age or sanctity, they are encrusted with jewels, the gifts of the pious.

said he. (Paul is a man of many presents and few words.) Everything Olga does is lovely in his sight. I have told Anthony heaps of times that Russians are the best husbands in the world. ‘Barring Englishmen,’ he says. I suppose he has to say it; a man would not be half a man if he did not stick up for his own country.

Presently Anthony and uncle Dimitri got to talking together; they pulled off a shade from the rest of the company. I could hear snatches of their conversation.

‘Yes,’ agreed uncle Dimitri. ‘It is a fine property, and in excellent good order. A handful of years ago things were going to the dogs—no method, no order, and no ready money. There was the rub—unhinged gates and fields dry as old land tubs—leakages everywhere.’

‘A big place like this—’

‘Lord save my soul !’ said uncle Dimitri. ‘You are on the wrong track altogether. Who would steal a farthing from Anna Nicolajevna ? I have known the agent not touch a penny of his salary for two years, and put it into ducks. That’s a figure of speech, ducks or hens, or roofing a barn, or saddling a horse—it all means the same thing.’

‘Yes,’ said Anthony, ‘of course it does.’

Down went uncle Dimitri’s cheery bass. ‘My friend,’ he whispered, ‘there is nothing so unmanageable as a woman’s pride. Why, I’d rather shoot Niagara in a basket than get Anna Nicolajevna to understand the rudiments of business.’

‘She is a clever woman for all that.’

‘Clever ? She is a genius, and she understands business about as well as Vera’s latest.’

‘You don’t say so.’

‘Indeed I do. We are up to our ears in proofs. Personally I prefer a straight tilt and an open-handed fight, but sometimes a skirmish will save the situation, backed by honest strategy—follow me ? ’

'Perfectly.'

'That is all right. Well, now, it is a fine, fat, paying concern. Look at those fields—prime—look at the stock—'

'Excellent, sir.'

'And the books are straight and simple, a child could understand them. Anna Nicolajevna is delighted with the books. She has gone through an elementary course of book-keeping, and likes to have things under her own control. The agent is only too pleased to oblige her, and Anna Nicolajevna is always thanking God.'

It is useless disguising the fact—sooner or later the truth is bound to come out. We are not a nice family. We are Cheats.

It sounds horrid, writing it down in cold blood. In our way we are just as despicable as the dishonest steward who tricked the gold-laced officialdom into bestowing upon him a coveted decoration.

The unjust steward succeeded, by sharpening his wits, in obtaining his order. We, by the selfsame practice, succeed in gaining the smiles of Anna Nicolajevna. Her splendid faith makes us go on cheating. She tots up the whole score and places it to the credit of God.

We cheat principally in live stock: in fat pigs and in spirited horses, in fleecy sheep and in prime milch cows, in hens of all sorts and conditions, in water-fowls and in ducks. We tried to cheat in fish, but, much to Paul Iljewitch's disappointment, the blue trout failed. Paul, commonly called 'Guns,' is little Olga's good-natured husband, and he looks the picture of an honest and prosperous gentleman.

The system, by now quite a gigantic business, began in quite a small way.

Five years ago, shortly after Vera's wedding, when she was paying her first visit home, she set the ball rolling.

She smuggled, entirely without her mother's knowledge, new blood into the fowl-house.

The fowls were getting deplorably low—say a dozen scraggy birds in the hencoop, and not the ghost of a spring chicken anywhere. The agent had not the heart, or the pluck, to inform our mother of the true state of affairs. He went on wringing the necks of the poultry according to her orders in a truly reckless spirit. The day of reckoning comes to us all.

McArthur is equally attached to the head of the house, but he is a grand man where his vegetables are concerned. He does not send up to table the last spring cabbage, airily suggesting that the stock will last well over Christmas.

Now the agent is all suggestion—mild and gentle—and a terrible fraud. He will willingly pay Satan a lie if it will save his mistress a tear.

How can you convert such a theory into practice when a needle in a haystack is easier to find than a surplus rouble ? How can you sell your chickens and eat them at the same time ? I never was an arithmetician.

As far as the fowls were concerned, Vera's prompt action saved the situation. Mother was not deprived of her favourite dish—roast chicken and strawberry jam.

You may well say we have no excuse for our behaviour—treating a grown woman as a child. You do not know Anna Nicolajevna. In some things she is childishly, wickedly, grievously young. She hardens her loving heart against the husbands—every one of them. She refuses point-blank, or weeping, to accept a farthing from these lucky individuals who not only are in love with their wives, but also rich in this world's goods.

You have no idea how awful it is to see Anna Nicolajevna roll on the drawing-room sofa and give herself up to loud-voiced despair.

Her tears flow readily at the mention of any settlement of her finances. She has a great and liberal mind, and she likes to let things slide, on the understanding that one day God will put everything to rights. She is blissfully certain that faith is the one thing that pays.

Of late the estate has been looking up—fat year after fat year have succeeded each other. With beautiful regularity the sheep have twins ; the hens are for ever laying, and clacking their eggs as fast as they can go ; the hay and the corn, and the cattle, turnips, and everything pertaining to a successful farm, show the same promising impetus : it really is delightful, and such a weight off one's mind.

Everyone is delighted. Even the old carriage horses, pensioned at an outlying farm, are satisfied. Their 'doubles,' only twenty years younger, get a handsome feed for their trouble—and Anna Nicolajevna considers them such wonderful animals.

The 'doubles' have pricked up their ears at her laudation.

'What is my age, my dear ?' the off horse will neigh to his stable companion ; 'nothing to make such a row about. What does she mean, the fat lady, when she looks at me as if I were a miracle ?'

'Dear old Hairpin,' Vera will murmur, with a decided wink, stroking the satin neck of the young mare.

She is a terror, is Vera—I suppose vice grows on you—one day she will give the show away, and Anna Nicolajevna will either weep herself to death or turn an atheist.

I wonder if the ingenious steward smiled contentedly when he held the coveted order in his hand ?

Rather a neat little story that—too lengthy to put down in uncle Hyppolyth's flowing style—but here is the germ of the matter.

The best part of the performance which led up to St.

Stanilaus fourth-class—the unjust steward did not soar high—was undoubtedly the spirited behaviour of the little Finnish horses—hard to beat for sagacity and endurance, narrow-chested little beasties, but good honest horses, worth a carrot apiece every morning of their lives.

In this instance, try to imagine their loads, the rough going—in spite of a heavy fall of snow; imagine the starless night, and, above all, consider time cut down to a fraction of a second. All honour to them!

At any moment gold-laced officialdom might have finished refreshing themselves at the expense of the much-maligned steward; at any moment the clerk, in attendance, might have done entering the report of the said steward's absolute integrity and honesty, a report which would definitely give the lie to false and wicked rumours.

By some incredible channel it had reached Petersburg that the Imperial granaries were not as they ought to be—in fact, very much the reverse; a rotten system was said to be draining the resources of the revenue.

Lies, nothing but lies, not a sack missing in the granaries! The Chief Inspector, who undertook to personally sift the matter, had, somewhat to his surprise—that is aside the matter—assured himself of each sack's just weight and their collective number. With zeal and commendable intelligence he and his staff went the round of the suspected area. I believe some twenty storehouses had a bad name against them.

After each inspection the steward with much politeness invited the great man to rest awhile in the best room which the place afforded. Apologising for the poor accommodation and the poorer fare, he engaged his chief in pleasant conversation.

The circuit was somewhat of a forced march, but the steward, all eagerness for the comfort of his guests, im-

plored them not to hurry ; always a kindly excuse to hand.

At the tenth farm—a wretched place—after the tenth inspection, which proved equally satisfactory as its predecessors, he told the great man that the moon would be up presently and greatly facilitate the journey along the wild and rugged roads.

Well and good : the tea was hot, the cognac excellent, mine host an agreeable fellow—the heavy big-wigs lolled round the sparkling fire as cosy as fleas ; the blinds were carefully drawn to exclude any possibility of draughts ; the steward was a most agreeable fellow.

Hardly had he started his first joke well on the road to success before, round the corner, at the big barn, an extraordinary activity set in.

No sound was heard ; the sweating workers worked in silence ; the brave little Finnish horses, like true sportsmen, entered into the spirit of the game, and stood at attention while their loads were being made up—each respective sack was carefully lowered into a waiting sledge, one thousand sacks of prime wheaten grain all told.

When his load was completed, a driver dangling his huge jack-boots over the side of the box, the little horse padded softly down the hill, past the lit-up windows of the inn, following his leader.

Once in open country, that growing, interminable tail laid on speed ; swifter than the wind flew the horses over the packed snow.

Sometimes at a convenient turn of the road they would look back, half imagining that the inspector and his party were gaining on them ; it hurt their ambition—what if the game was lost !

‘ Hey up—one pull more ! We are almost there ! ’

Thus encouraged, they galloped through the night. No

accident occurred. One thousand sacks of prime wheaten grain—intact—good.

Up the steep ladder, leading to the empty barn, the men crept as trained soldiers—unloading this time. Lord in heaven, practice makes perfect ! Is not this the eleventh Imperial storehouse which gold-laced officialdom will presently inspect and incidentally the selfsame sacks—to gold-laced officialdom's complete satisfaction ?

There is nothing like fooling a man thoroughly, says uncle Hyppolyth, when describing these things. He can tell a story, no doubt about it !

I rather fancy the ingenious steward had the laugh on his side when he fondled the coveted order.

None of us laugh when Anna Nicolajevna gives thanks to God for His manifold blessings. We are not hardened sinners—and, after all, a mother must be nearer your heart than an emperor ; there is very little in common between us and the unjust steward.

For one thing, our methods are radically opposed ; instead of defrauding Russja-Kaja, we materially increase her possessions—the sin lies in our secret dealings. Oh, I can tell you it is a curse to smuggle a bullock along, or a contrary pig—even if we suppose that mother is looking the other way, or that she is safely shut up in the house, reading aloud the *Revue des Deux Mondes* to tante Katja. I suppose it is a bad conscience which makes us over-anxious.

If mother had only been a better business woman. Generosity itself, she guilelessly imagines that Russja-Kaja must not only feed us, but also pay us. She would be horrified at the notion of buying any article of food with the exception of groceries, and wine, and medicines.

Even clothes do not mean an appreciable outlay. Mademoiselle Cleo is moderate in her charges—for all that

she is French—and the sheep provide us with our woollen garments ; the flax, after some considerable trouble, turns into excellent linen both for personal use and household purposes.

There is practically nothing a well-ordered estate will not provide you—if you work it properly. It requires a certain amount of tact to make both ends meet. I have known gentlemen who have ruined themselves in farming.

We are up to every trick of the trade ! And our dear mother fondly imagines she is the clever one—not that she ever boasts—still, there is no denying facts. At present Russja-Kaja is in splendid condition.

There is really only one thing which upsets Anna Nicolajevna—try to talk sensibly to her—try to arrange her debts—bless you, hysterics at once ; it is terrible.

A shortage of fish would never make her wild to follow the immortal Vatel's example, and dash herself on uncle Dimitri's famous sword—try to offer to help her in a pecuniary matter and see what happens !

Tante Katja and uncle Dimitri, who are both of independent means, paid quarterly as regularly as spring succeeds to winter—and more so, because the weather is often uncertain, can fully sympathise with the poor married sisters.

As Vera so pathetically remarks, what is the good of it all ?

Vera, who has married opulent diplomacy, might just as well have taken an aspiring poet ; Marussa, who married her wealthy cousin and a salary at Court, might equally have fallen in love with a penniless subaltern ; and little Olga, who at barely seventeen years of age found herself, figuratively speaking, up to her neck in clover and guns—there is nothing which pays better than guns if you only have enough of them—might just as well have stumbled

amongst derelict field-pieces left over from Napoleon's campaign—for all they are allowed to help mother.

Yes, certainly, she is proud of her daughters, proud of the matches they have made, and quite complacently agrees with uncle Dimitri that, taking her children collectively, you could not find a better-looking brood between Archangel and Vladivostok ; but on no account will she be induced to 'fleece the husbands.'

The very awfulness of the idea sends her head foremost into violent hysterics.

She buries her face in a convenient cushion, wringing her beautiful hands together, and sobbing that her children—her darling children—are brutes, every one of them ; tante Katja and the uncles are no better, if anything worse ; as they ought to know better. Surely, even if they do not love her . . . they might respect her pride. . . . She has lived too long, most certainly she has lived too long. . . . let them spend their uttermost farthing in embellishing her grave.

It is terrible when Anna Nicolajevna gives us her permission to be extravagant over her tombstone ; we all hate it, irrespective of whether we have the money or not.

She only ceases to sob when all the culprits—tante Katja, poor old dear, all trembling ; uncle Dimitri, near tears himself ; uncle Hyppolyth looking fierce (for no reason) ; Vera, Marussa, and little Olga scarlet-cheeked—kiss her and promise her faithfully they will never mention the hateful subject again.

No wonder we cheat her !

Mother has all her life managed her housekeeping on exceedingly simple lines.

Whenever the stores run low, or when she fancies something specially nice for dinner, she sits down to her writing-

table and scribbles off an order to the agent—in her rather untidy handwriting.

She does not waste words, and her orders scan something like this :

‘Four chickens for to-morrow.’ . . . ‘Please fatten a calf for next month.’ . . . ‘Required one hectolitre rye flour, one ditto wheat—any time to-day.’ . . . ‘A sheep on Wednesday.’ . . . ‘Twenty-five quarts of morning milk, daily, until further notice.’

There was a time—not so very long ago—when the agent tore his hair every time he got one of mother’s scribbled instructions. Now, however, he is pleased to honour every one of Anna Nicolajevna’s pencilled notes.

He tells her things are looking up on the farm ; the cows are milking excellently ; the pigs are doing famously ; and as to the sheep and the fowls, there is no end to them.

Anna Nicolajevna is always thanking God.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WEDDING DRESS

WE have had a day of it! Everyone is tired out by sheer anxiety.

Such a commotion going on in the house since morning, everyone running about, complaining, explaining, warning, deplored, talking, inventing, comforting—a house of chattering magpies.

The reason?

I am coming to it.

To-day, to-day of all days, Cleo has chosen to take to her bed! No threat, no possibility—solid, sheer, unutterable fact. Was there ever such luck?

We have not given her much peace. Throughout the weary hours we have walked in upon her, individually or in anxious groups, advising, remonstrating, reporting. Everyone, from the twins upward, has suggested a new and infallible cure.

Cure or no cure, remedy or no remedy, mademoiselle must be up and about to-morrow. She sees it herself and groans—under her untidy blankets.

She might be allowed to keep her restless feet to herself, in bed, if by some ‘meericle’ she could send her capable fingers into the workroom, hovering over the table, directing labour; not all our transmitted suggestions will prevent the Dress spoiling if left to the inspiration of the ‘girls,’ ‘nice fools, but not an idea amongst them’—to quote Cleo’s rather unkind summing-up.

The situation is frankly terrible. Work is practically at a standstill. Mademoiselle has been kept all day tossing in her narrow bed, a prey to feverish remorse.

'Mon Dieu,' she has murmured; 'quelle aventure—c'est épatant!'

Indeed a frightful adventure—without parallel except in the history of nightmare. Who compiled the last edition? To be taken mortal bad on the very eve of the trying on of the wedding dress.

There is horror for you in a nutshell! The wedding day inside next week and nothing ready!

The clock all day had been running on, just like those wretched racing men—dogged determination on each hard-put minute.

Ten o'clock—is she any better? Twelve o'clock—has she taken any food? Four o'clock—has she had any sleep? Oh, the weary round of questions.

She does not pay for attention, Mademoiselle Cleo—in fact, our untiring efforts seem to have a dismal effect. Last time I looked into her room Cleo was whimpering under the bed-clothes. 'My head!' she said, 'my head!'

Kasimir, at the foot of the bed, was mixing something in a tumbler.

'Kasimir,' I said, 'come away. She is sleeping.'

She was not. She was groaning.

The dress is on the first rung of its important life—cut out and basted together. It is lying on the workroom table, all spread out, as a peacock's tail, on a snowy sheet. It looks sizes too fast for Fanny. The material allowed such a train!

It is the very corpse of lost ambition. Mademoiselle was working against time, up to last night, snipping and snapping her unwieldy scissors with amazing dexterity and no less strength of mind.

Never tell me it feels good to cut into a length of lovely white satin, with a peach bloom on its smooth surface and a velvet touch to the hand. Think if one cut it to waste—think if one doubled the front breadth—creepy !

Well, you see it did for Cleo. Her nerves gave way. Anna Nicolajevna calls her lamentable illness a nervous breakdown.

‘ Oh ! ’ said mother, ‘ and she could have broken down after the wedding and welcome.’

I am afraid we were all inclined to look upon the dress-maker as selfish.

We did not suggest her getting up. That was her affair, of course.

Aunt Hélène invariably sends the wedding satin. It is always right, splendidly right, and each time it arrives at the eleventh hour. The unavoidable delay—so aunt Hélène writes—is caused by the vagaries of the manufacturers or the tradespeople ; whatever the cause it keeps us all at a pitch of excitement, and turns Cleo’s back hair greyer than it was before.

Not all the ups and downs of commerce would have any effect on her front hair, which is literally ‘ a front ’ of a decided brown colour, sometimes a shade or two dusty.

You cannot be over-particular if you spend the best part of your life bending over a table cutting out clothes. Cleo puts in a variety of work ; she is a seamstress, a fancy needlewoman, a dressmaker—a very versatile artist.

She would be of little use otherwise in our family. Anna Nicolajevna has to look to the main chance, and do the best she can for us.

If Kasimir wants a set of shirts, the twins will have to ‘ do ’ with their old dresses until he is satisfied. I am speaking of ordinary work-a-day life. A wedding outfit always comes first.

A huff.

By six o'clock in the evening Mademoiselle Cleo had crept completely under her bed-clothes. We only saw the point of her coquettish nightcap, with a pink bow in it, sticking up above the blankets.

She had waived aside her dinner, and admitted that the sound of a sewing-machine sent her mad, as she knew it would have to be unpicked if the good God allowed her to get up again.

'Stop that machine!' she said.

Her earnestness had the desired effect. Anna Nicolajevna sent Marussa to box up the machine and Beata—one of ten Sonjay's promising daughters—into a cupboard of a place, on the distinct understanding to work quietly, as mademoiselle was expiring out of sheer temper.

The cessation of noise—the workroom adjoins mademoiselle's bedroom—and being left alone for an hour or two had a startling effect on the invalid.

By nine o'clock she sat up in bed, dishevelled and determined, and asked for a cup of black coffee.

Having drunk her coffee, liberally sweetened, she declared she was feeling miraculously better. She wanted to get up at once.

'Don't think of it!' said Anna Nicolajevna.

'Dear Cleo,' said Fanny, 'do not exert yourself.'

'I will die, but most certainly I will die if you put the obstacles in my way!' wailed the obstinate one.

There is no earthly use of bandying words with Cleo. We met her half-way.

To satisfy her craving for action, the Dress, on the dress-stand, a melon of pins, a tape measure, and Fanny—in stays and petticoat—were brought into position in front of the sick bed. All the available lamps were 'borrowed.'

Cleo's room is small, but I assure you a great many of us

managed to crowd in during the fitting. It was a tense moment when Anna Nicolajevna slipped Fanny into the dress.

And all the time mademoiselle—propped up by pillows—kept up a volley of excited instructions. At last she could not stand the ‘fiddling’ any longer. Down went the bed-clothes. She skipped, actually skipped out of bed, and fell on Fanny, or rather on Fanny’s train, sublimely unconscious of the effect of her long-cloth nightdress and an exhibition of decidedly weak ankles.

‘Mon Dieu,’ she chattered, ‘quelle aventure, c’est épatant !’

Anna Nicolajevna rushed her into a red flannel dressing-jacket.

With excited fingers mademoiselle plucked her melon. ‘Soyez bien tranquille, mademoiselle !’ she admonished Fanny before a goodly proportion of the selected pins wandered into her mouth.

We were all too nervous to speak.

Mademoiselle Cleo is a true artist. A very few touches and Fanny’s unaccustomed train ‘fell’ in exquisite folds.

‘My head, my head !’ cried mademoiselle.

We hurried her back to bed.

Even the marking had got behindhand. Everyone has, for some weeks past, been pressed into service.

Tante Katja has laid aside her tatting and undertaken the dusters—dusters only run to canvas and red cotton. Tante Katja’s eyes are quite good enough for this class of work.

Every needleful helps.

A drowsy morning. The north verandah was deliciously cool; a grateful shadow, which stretched as far as the elderberry bushes and entirely covered the green see-saw bench.

Looking up from my third napkin—done that morning—I noticed that Sascha had not moved his position. He was sitting on the see-saw bench, got up in white drill and yellow boots and a Homburg hat—he is rather exact about his clothes ; a speck of dust on himself gives him unspeakable sorrow.

Does not that one little trait give away his character ?—precise, selfish, and now, sitting there on the see-saw bench, sulky.

No doubt about it. He very rarely looked our busy way, but when he did he had a vindictive glance for the glass-cloths. Fanny was doing the glass-cloths. (She might spoil fine work.) She knows her industry is not appreciated by her young man—poor dear, he wants to be amused ! He wants to take Fanny down the garden paths and talk over his prospects. Sascha is full of prospects. He intends, one day, to make the world wag, if not the world, his department. He is full of schemes—Fanny finds them wrapped in interest.

Anna Nicolajevna, angel though she is, finds them dull talking.

Mother never was a politician. She has cause to dislike reforms. She has no valid cause to dislike Sascha—we none of us have ; he is not aggressively disagreeable ; but there it is, except poor, darling, blinded Fanny, we none of us rise to him.

The Diplomat, threading needles, acquitted himself of a creditable speech. Guns, cutting into waste material, looked up with sudden jealousy. He is rather backward in firing off pretty speeches, but I know he would have loved to take the words out of the Diplomat's mouth—using little Olga as ammunition.

Mother oiled the Diplomat's tongue.

‘ What do my daughters bring you ?—nothing : a pack of

linen for the honour of the family, a bundle of clothes for the honour of themselves—not a rouble between them. daughters are intolerable matches and excellent wives.'

The Diplomat threaded tante Katja's needle carefully before answering. 'Vera brought me youth, beauty, health, and a heart of gold!' said he.

'True, true,' murmured her remorseful mother, glancing up at Vera's serious face. (She, Vera, is not good at embroidering initials, but she is very painstaking.)

Uncle Dimitri, that waspish uncle Dimitri, complained loudly over our industry.

'You can't move a step,' he said, 'without upsetting a pile of chemises or entangling yourself in a heap of towels. Is not ink cheap, good, and effective? What is the good of spoiling my lovely temper and ruining your lovely eyes—the senseless folly of Anna Nicolajevna?'

Anna Nicolajevna was far too busy embroidering, in her inimitable manner, Fanny's initials on a sheer lawn handkerchief—to retort. She just waved her embroidery scissors at uncle Dimitri.

To re-establish peace tante Katja folded her sixth duster—done that morning—and pushed it across to uncle Dimitri.

That is his work—pulling out the canvas threads.

He seated himself, in a good light, and commenced operations with tremendous gravity and overweening importance; it takes him an incredible time to 'pull' six dusters.

Out on the see-saw bench Sascha shifted his position.

Presently uncle Dimitri rose and stretched himself.

'Any more?' he asked.

'No, dear,' said Vera, looking at him roguishly. 'You know you don't approve of sweating.'

Uncle Dimitri nipped her ear in passing, lighted a

cigarette, and went down the verandah steps whistling. He evaded the see-saw bench.

'Fanny!' Sascha lost his patience and could not find it anywhere.

'Tired of it already?' twittered Venus, looking round the corner. 'You silly little man. I have stood here for fifty years.'

'Fifty years, fifty years,' echoed Apollo.

The elderberry bush took up the tale.

The old sundial repeated it.

The ancient limes carried the words still farther.

Soon the whole place was rocking with laughter. Obviously Sascha heard nothing.

CHAPTER XIV

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

THIS morning I happened to wake by myself. I got up and dressed in a twinkle—mighty pleased to steal a march on old Mascha.

Outside, a dazzling morning took me thoroughly in hand. If I had had any creases on my mind she would have ironed them out flat. I tell you a beautiful morning united to a beautiful temper is the most lovely thing on earth.

I am an authority on good spirits—ask my friends, ask my relatives—ask old McArthur, if you think I am vain-glorious and boastful. I am not the one to glorify a sulky disposition—I despise sulks. I really am good-tempered, a sin and a shame if it were otherwise, considering Jane's privileges. It is not everyone who lives at youth's corner with a key into love's garden and a free drink at the well of health—of course I have an immense advantage.

This morning I felt my advantages keenly, just because it happened to be a young summer morning, fresh and fair and cool, dropped right into the heart of the dog-days. August is a week old to-day, to be accurate.

The bees are busy, the flowers prodigious, the light and shade on the hills most convincingly true. Besides these manifold attractions, a great God has soused the air with elixir, dry champagne, anything you fancy which is stimulating.

It set me fairly running. I ran down the Broad Walk alive to my very finger-tips.

From the bath-house verandah I watched the sun slanting over the forest and dropping sheer, as a ball of gold, into the river.

I felt like singing all the time. I was one with the sun, and one with the flowers, and one with the happy birds. It is a help on you, as McArthur says—this power of creeping into the heart of things. Of course, if you are a flabby, distrustful person, you can pipe any note you please and always be out of tune.

If you want to sing solo in the world's greatest chorus, you have got to listen to the hum of the forest, the twitting chaffinches, and the splash of the river. To put it plainly, you have got to love nature. Full of love, I took a header into the river.

I half expected to see old Neptune plunge out of his river-bed and challenge me to a feat of strength. I felt so splendidly fit and strong, quite capable of flinging him back my beloved slippery rocks, as if they were the merest pebbles.

I swam about, peering into the dark pools. Where the cross currents meet, raising frothy bubbles, I rested on the water, listening for all I was worth.

Note after note I heard, but never a sound of Neptune's voice or his gruff laugh ; nor did I see his mossy beard, or watery eyes, or his sinewy limbs, and his great massive shoulders. I have always pictured Neptune twin brother to Bacchus—why, I cannot understand, because they do not agree as to drinks.

Give me a draught of Neptune's elixir before a caskful of Bacchus's heady stuff. I never was great on wine ; in fact, I am no judge at all, and I always put castor sugar into my claret, which makes uncle Dimitri mad.

Not that I madden him often ; wine is scarce on our table—such a needless expense, when butter-milk is to be

had for the asking, and home-brewed ale—small, very small—at the same price.

If Russja-Kaja ran to vines, I expect we would all end in a reformatory—Lord bless me, how they would bear luscious purple grapes, and, very probably, for each grape the cellar would yield one imperial quart of good red wine. Nothing would surprise us, and nothing seems to surprise Anna Nicolajevna !

Down by the pool of lilies—now all of a bloom, rocking, waxen flowers, their broad, wide leaves the island-home of pixies—I again hoped Neptune would turn up trumps and throw the first rock. I clutched a great wet boulder, with my legs stretched behind, straight as oars, waiting the signal to begin.

Even McArthur, once the battle was in full swing, would surely cock an ear and listen—such a dashing and such a splashing and such silvery laughter must have attracted his attention.

I laughed aloud at the very thought of McArthur's surprise.

You see, McArthur prides himself on never being surprised. If all the poppies developed faces—swollen toothache faces—and moaned at him when he, the first thing in the morning, passed them by, he would not be taken aback.

'Nasty weedy creatures,' he would say. 'Ivan, where are you ? you lazy rascal—is it a hayfield her Excellency expected to see the first thing in the morning ? '

And Ivan-smallpox would set the ancient mowing-machine a-rolling.

Anna Nicolajevna's bedroom door stood ajar this morning, when, after my bath, I pattered down the corridor in straw slippers and my hair drying—not at all a presentable person.

'Come here, Jane,' she called, catching sight of me ; and of course I ran into her expecting arms.

'Top of the morning, mother darling !' I cried. 'It is such a perfect morning—it is going to be fearfully hot presently, and Sascha will complain over the heat, and tante Katja will rejoice, and the babies will surely be allowed to paddle, and if McArthur turns up trumps—'

'You chatterbox !' said mother, kissing back the last word. 'Let me look at you, Jane.'

She did, critically lying back on her cushions. I went up to the mirror and rubbed my nose thoughtfully.

'Blistered,' I said. 'It is an awful thing to suffer from a shiny nose. What can I do ?'

'Leave it alone.'

Still her eyes followed me.

I sat down on a convenient stool and tipped my feet up and down in their loose straw slippers.

'Don't catch cold, darling,' said mother.

'I am clammy hot all over,' I assured her. 'After breakfast I am going back—it was lovely.'

'You're not coming down like that,' said my mother, running her eyes over my muslin wrapper. 'The garden of Eden is just outside Russja-Kaja.'

'Is it not a pity ? On a day like this you hate being outside paradise. I believe, right away, in the heart of the forest, God has set down a tiny square of His own land. . . . Mother, hurry up everyone, and we will go for a picnic ! I will dress in a twinkle.' I rose and thrust my feet into the loose slippers.

'Some other day,' said mother. 'God's land is never far away if you only look out for it. I want to talk to you.'

I grew suddenly cool ; I believe I shivered. A straight talk invariably leads up to something unpleasant. I flashed powerful lenses through my memory, but I could not

follow a single backsliding unsifted. My sins always find me out at once ; my sins are all on the surface for the daws to peck at. (N.B.—A scarcity of vultures at Russja-Kaja.)

Mother's eyes were softer than a dove's plumage, and she is not a double-dyed sneak.

She was lying back on her long couch by the open window—actually open—with a little flutter in the lace curtains, and a little hum of life outside, and one rambling creeper nodding for all it was worth, tap-tapping the pane.

Otherwise all peace and quiet in mother's room ; an habitual dimness ; it is a room of soft shadows ; the only spot of brightness was mother herself, wrapped in a flowing chintz-patterned wrapper—white, with great yellow roses—full-blown roses and bluish buds and apple-green foliage, and, if I mistake not, a powdering of gaudy butterflies—a really splendid garment enhanced by multitudinous frills and plenty of starch, finished by a dash of lace at throat and elbows, and three red ribbon bows—geranium-red. A glorified dressing-gown !

Her beautiful hair was coiled in massive plaits on the top of her head. She was wearing all her emerald rings, and her hands were brown, and her nice fat arms, above the wrists, pink and white as a baby's leg.

She was leaning against a cushion of a hideous magenta colour—no, not really hideous, only an unfortunate shade ; a present from our aunt, Princess Hélène Orloff-Patshin, who always does her best for us.

Mother, in her rosary of thankfulness, counts tante Hélène as a very special bead ; she says none of us must ever forget it—the goodness of tante Hélène. It is tante Hélène who disposes of our photographs to the best advantage.

We come out by photograph.

It is our only fling before marriage.

We have none of us been allowed a season in town—Anna Nicolajevna does not approve of town life for young girls. She has us photographed instead—much cheaper than buying ball-dresses and getting stuffed with nonsense, compliments and attention, and just as satisfactory in the end.

There is a freshness about it altogether charming, writes the aunt. Evidently she does things by entirely different methods.

Anna Nicolajevna goes to the expense of having a first-class man—a court photographer down from Petersburg—to take us. She wants to give us every advantage. Uncle Dimitri annoys her by declaring that the little local man would answer the purpose admirably.

‘ You don’t want fancy pictures of youth and beauty,’ he says, flicking his left-hand thumb-nail against the decorative background of the artist’s proof.

Our mother, who, when she spends money, likes to be justified in her outlay, retaliates by calling uncle Dimitri an old fossil, a countrified bumpkin, and what not.

They love, in all affection, to war in words, and never did steel rapier flash more easily than their pointed language. You would not care for sea-water with the salt left out, would you ?

Uncle Dimitri would not be the entirely lovable person he is if he left off teasing ; we expect it of him, and would be woefully disappointed if he grew into a man of peace. Would not suit the character at all of one of the bravest soldiers alive. Think of those sliced Turks—and they are only an item in a long list of glory.

There is nothing really harsh about his methods—he is just steeped in racy good-temper. Fancy uncle Dimitri cross ; fancy uncle Dimitri sulky ! O never in the world !

‘ The man is coming down to take the wedding group, you’d better be done at the same time ; there is nothing

like opportunity ; besides, Jane, you are getting on ; you are eighteen, and Olga was married at seventeen.'

I could not do away with the reproach in mother's voice—it hurt me—and nothing I could say would mitigate the solid fact that Olga married into guns at seventeen.

'Yes,' I agreed dutifully. At the back of my mind I was hoping that my first grown-up photograph would not be a success, that no eligible young man would notice it, beautifully framed, standing on tante Hélène's grand-piano—and begin asking questions.

Questions are fatal—if it pleases our aunt to answer them in her best manner ; she does not give us away for nothing.

My sisters have never had a proper chance. What with their beautiful pictures, coupled with my aunt's glowing description of their unique perfections, 'the daughters of Countess Anna Daraskoff, the most splendid woman in Russia,' no proper-minded young man could very well resist their charms.

Personally, I would much rather not be married by photograph—it is tiresome, whatever mother may say. We all know tante Hélène's gushing letters, written on cream paper, heavily scented, when she advises us of a 'pretendant.' We all know he will be nice—our aunt has a much better taste in possible husbands than in cushions. We all know the young man will pay us a visit, and that our mother will be charming towards him—she is charming towards everyone—and that, supposing the young man does not fall deeper in love with his dream face, he will in any case fall in love with Russja-Kaja.

There is a clinging sweetness about the place ; it traps you at once and holds you for ever. The place fills you with love. Everyone is of the same opinion.

So they come—one by one—the shadowy lovers from life beyond our gates. As a rule, first come first served.

The elder girls have been very docile. The excitement of having a lover has invariably given them a taste for love. They have accepted their 'pretendants' so nicely—given no trouble in the world.

And Anna Nicolajevna has cried a little and smiled a great deal and nearly consoled herself over the delight of collecting the trousseau, but not entirely forgiving her daughter's desertion until the first baby of the young *ménage* has hidden its little head against her ample breast.

Then all the pain passes for nothing.

If there is one thing our mother loves above another it is a baby.

I expect if the court photographer realised how successful his 'fancy pictures' were, he would raise his prices all round.

Mother talked, and I said 'yes.' I was not at all in a garrulous mood. I sat very quietly on my stool staring rather moodily at my bare feet.

How time passes !

Little Jane is eighteen and her mother wants to marry her : it is the equivalent of being photographed.

I wonder, I wonder what he will be like ? What kind of a man would be struck with a smallish female possessing 'tea-cup' eyes and just a mane of silky hair ? I won't have you think it is horsehair—it is fine and dark, and has an unexpected ripple in it. Then I am rather pale, 'pasty'-looking, saved, by the colour of my lips, from an anaemic advertisement picture before the cure ; true, pictures do not always give you the colours. 'Madame, I leave it to you,' as one of our tradesmen always says, excepting when it is a question of the bill.

A tiresome subject. Let us leave that sulky little Jane tapping her bare feet in her straw slippers, and instead, have a peep at mother's room.

By daylight it is nothing extraordinarily enticing—large, gloomy, dark. At night, with a fire just lit in the great yellow stove, all the curtains drawn, and a pair of candles flickering over the toilet-table, it looks lovely.

When mother's room was done up it was all the fashion to keep things heavy and dark. There are masses of furniture in the room, all in mahogany and upholstered in dark green rep with a black stripe in it—nothing very coquettish for a lady's bedroom, but grand for wear and tear.

The wall-papers are also very dark green with brown stripes this time. Not that you notice anything wrong with the papers, they only form a background for innumerable pictures, knick-knacks, trifles of every kind and description.

The walls of mother's bedroom represent her children's ages and the museum of her heart.

In her own room she collects all our offerings, and the greater part of her friends'. Presents which will not hang, such as pigs, pin-trays, small pieces of Bohemian glass, watchstands, models of towers, and models of ships, Easter eggs, and pen-wipers, are placed on brackets and shelves—such a collection, and, I am afraid—dusty.

Look to the right, and maybe you will strike a cloudless saucer—as bright a piece of Parisian brasswork as you could wish to find—and a rosary of ebon beads polished to a nicety.

Old Mascha always starts her dusting in the right-hand corner, but before she can work round the walls, she is nearly always called away, which leaves mother's treasures in rather a piebald condition.

And Mascha is as obstinate an old Christian as ever lived, and has not much memory to boast of. When the

next week comes round she starts with the Japanese lacquer-box, methodically, anxiously, thoroughly. . . .

‘Mascha! Mascha!’ someone calls.

Out she pants, mumbling between her toothless gums ‘St. Nicholas!’

St. Nicholas, great saint as he is, will not finish the dusting. The Bohemian glass looks wickedly across the great dark room to the complacent lacquer-box. . . .

The only piece of furniture in Anna Nicolajevna’s bedroom which is kept scrupulously neat is her massive mahogany toilet-table, which she has inherited from her great-grandmother. There is nothing on it whatsoever, excepting a pair of crystal bottles, the one containing hair tonic and the other eau-de-Cologne.

There is another little oddity about mother’s bedroom. You would never at a first glance discover the bed.

Behind the fixed mahogany screen, reaching almost to the ceiling, supplied with heavy rep curtains, which successfully shut out the alcove as well as all light and air, stand mother’s bed and mother’s washing-stand. The broad mahogany bed takes up such an unfair amount of space that the washing-stand is squeezed in a corner, furnished with a modest marble slab and a basin and ewer to match.

Large as is the big room, it is overcrowded with furniture: sofas, chairs, tables, a great swinging mirror, chests-of-drawers, woolly mats, and florid carpets, a writing-table, of course, and plants, great, fat, fine plants of evergreen variety—rather an unusual bedroom, I fancy, and bad for the complexion, you might say.

Not at all: Anna Nicolajevna thrives wonderfully on the no-air system, it suits her constitution, she grows pink and fat on it, which our English governess considers all the more amazing and almost immoral.

You see, she, poor dear, is an air [faddist, sleeps all the year round with an open window (ugh !), and the consequence is she is pinched and faded and yellow ; she is, honour bright—you never saw a worse skin—liverish.

We all feel at home in mother's bedroom.

Very often after saying good night to us downstairs, she invites the whole party into her room.

We all accept the invitation with alacrity : the uncles, the aunts, the children—except the very little ones, who are asleep—the casual visitors, and the fiancé, if there happens to be one about—sometimes her room is crowded to suffocation.

No one gives it a thought, least of all Anna Nicolajevna. Anyone who has been surreptitiously yawning downstairs becomes wide-awake directly they enter mother's room. I believe some of us are prepared for an all-night sitting.

There is a fascination about the place, particularly so in winter.

Then we gather round the stove and watch the flickering logs, and maybe someone tells us a story, or we talk in whispering groups, or just sit silently around, half-dozing and wholly happy.

As a rule, mother produces a box of chocolates, or, out of the stove niche, warming nicely, claret-cup, which she pours out herself in the Bohemian glasses. At times the glasses will not go round the company—as if it mattered ! Many a thankful soul has toasted his neighbour in a loving-cup.

If it is autumn you can smell your refreshment long before Anna Nicolajevna brings the apple-basket forward—her old disreputable rush-basket filled with rosy-cheeked apples. We dispense with plates and knives—there is

nothing wrong about the skin of an apple if you know who has gathered it. We all give mother credit for clean fingers, and that she has been round herself that morning in the orchards ; we almost seem to see the morning sun on the ripe red fruit.

‘ What an excellent apple ! ’ says one of the casual visitors.

‘ A Kentish pippin,’ says mother, digging her teeth into an Astrakhan ; ‘ the children’s great-great-grandmother, Countess Sylvia, came from Kent.’

I assure you, at times, it gets very late before uncle Hyppolyth, lost in the great bentwood rocking-chair—his seat—suddenly grasps the meaning of mother’s repeated nods and winks.

When he does understand, he gets up at once and slips quietly out of the room.

The fire by now very dim—just a glow of red ashes.

Most of the guests are silent. Vera, maybe, has tucked herself up on the sofa, and Olga has slipped down on the floor, leaning her head against mother’s knee. Maybe mother is stroking her hair without knowing it.

The casual visitors are startled by the sound of a most beautifully played air on a violin. Nearer and nearer comes the music. On the threshold of mother’s room uncle Hyppolyth pauses, still playing—he never leaves off playing until he has cleared the room—it is the signal of retreat. We kiss Anna Nicolajevna good night, listening to the dreamy music of Chopin.

Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, uncle Hyppolyth leads the way through the dark corridors of the quiet house. We none of us speak—silently we disappear into our rooms, dispersing in all directions.

When the last long-drawn note dies away we know that uncle Hyppolyth has reached his own room. Sometimes

we wonder if, behind his closed door, he still goes on playing for the benefit of an invisible host of angels.

If I played like uncle Hyppolyth I would never care to finish, I would just go on playing for ever. Is it not vile bad luck ? I am not musical.

I remember, years ago, when I was quite a little girl, passing down the terrace outside uncle Hyppolyth's room and seeing him sitting at his window looking out on the moonlit garden.

I will never forget his engrossed expression. He was seeing things—uncle Hyppolyth.

It was a very peaceful night ; not a breath stirred the painted trees in the green park, not a leaf fluttered in the carved lime avenue.

You could have heard a pin drop on the terrace walk—and seen it fall. The moon splashed full on the silvery gravel—the angles of the great house showed black as ink.

I hurried home, comfortably frightened—I knew the spirits were abroad. I had the imagination to see them ; but they did not terrify me. Passing uncle Hyppolyth's window I nodded to him. He did not notice me.

His face looked quite beautiful in the full play of the moonlight, such a confident, happy face, and his dear, faded eyes were full of colour.

I stayed a moment. I fancied uncle Hyppolyth was practising. He was not playing, he was listening in his turn to the company of angels making fair music.

I held my breath and watched his face.

Down the ladder of memory the angels of his youth were climbing, climbing down the golden stairs of the flooded sky, light as in the morning of life, bringing to uncle Hyppolyth the gift of perfect sight.

Only a passing glimpse of a faithful heart, yet I felt as if someone had made me a nice present.

I have it still.

One night, at ebb tide, my young angels will climb down my heavenly stairs, and at night I will see a great light.

Faith, wherever it happens, is a torch by the way.

The pity of life.

I forget.

Uncle Hyppolyth is a good Enemy.

An implacable, unforgiving Enemy.

Uncle Hyppolyth lives at one corner of the rambling mansion—uncle Dimitri has his rooms at the other end.

A whole world divides the Enemies.

CHAPTER XV

THE ENEMIES AGAIN, AND A BABY

HAVE you ever come across polite enemies ? I do not mean smiling, whitened sepulchres, full of ravening wolves inside—people who instinctively dislike you and who keep on smiling. There are such horrors, I believe.

Vera, who has had worldly experience, sometimes tells us things entirely unbelievable and utterly appalling. If you listened to some of her stories you would feel out of joint with the whole idea of creation.

One wonders why God does not do His best for His little world, and weed out the unpleasant characters. I suppose it is biblical—‘The wicked shall flourish as a bay tree.’

I know it is depressing.

Of course I may be writing very great rubbish, and you, experienced people of the world, may well shrug your shoulders at me, and contemptuously remark that Jane is a fool.

(O, shades of good fortune, guard your miserable child—Jane—who is making a fool of herself !)

To return to the Enemies and their peculiar attitude one towards the other.

‘Will you kindly, dear Jane,’ says uncle Dimitri, glancing across to uncle Hyppolyth, ‘remind your uncle to be sure to take his overcoat ? We do not want him ill again.’

Uncle Hyppolyth smiles at no one in particular. ‘Thank your uncle Dimitri,’ he says. ‘And, Jane, mention, will you, that down by the ten-acre field I discovered this morning any number of partridges.’

Uncle Dimitri smiles broadly.

‘How excellent !’ he says. ‘I will have a pop at them to-morrow. Dear Jane, I beg of you to thank your uncle Hyppolyth for his kind information.’

They never fail to give each other good advice and useful knowledge—alas ! always through that most unnecessary third person, neither of the uncles is deaf.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if they found themselves unexpectedly alone on a desert island. How in the world would they manage their conversation ? I expect one uncle would beg the sky to pass on his remark, looking blandly above the head of his Enemy, and the other uncle would fix his eyes on his Enemy’s shoe-laces and ask the sad seashore to transmit his message. Neither the one nor the other would ever laugh. There is nothing so dense as enmity.

Bother, bother, bother—why cannot they bury their quarrel, when it is so evidently painful to them both to keep it alive ?

I expect it is just curséd pride, and nothing to do with a woman. A woman is such a sacred subject ; if there had been a woman in the case, surely they would not now surreptitiously look at each other, with a world of patient sorrow—no, it is not a woman.

More likely a hasty word drenched in wine. Vera says nothing makes a man so stupid as drink. After seven bottles—if they are fairly seasoned—two young men will say anything and do anything on the spur of the moment ; invariably they will regret things the following morning, and promptly set about forgetting the unpleasantness.

No, it is not wine ; they have forgotten nothing ; such tenacious, bulldog memories—and all the time pining to shake hands and make it up, and have a good long talk without a shadow of a witness.

Pride keeps them back ; neither wishes to take the first step. In their place I would both talk at once, roar at each other, scream at each other, and have done with it.

It would only be like having a tooth out.

‘A little nerve, my man, and you will be all the better for it,’ as our dentist says pleasantly to Kasimir—the only one of us who suffers from indifferent teeth—when he has him in his chair.

As a small boy Kasimir loathed parting with his rotten teeth. And our mother had to stand by him, encouraging him, with a glass of cold water in one hand, and in the other a selection of his favourite candies.

No doubt about it, Kasimir is a greedy boy. He loves certain dishes which do not love him, they attack him afterwards with pains, down below ; but Kasimir never complains, instead, he says, ‘it is worth it.’

Just imagine the Elysian feast the dear foolish, pig-headed uncles are disdaining—oh dear, oh dear, if they do not hurry themselves, they will never be able to get through all the courses.

At times the same idea strikes them forcibly ; you can see it all over their faces, especially when uncle Hyppolyth is confined to his room by one of his chests.

On these sad occasions uncle Dimitri tears off the mask of indifference pretty effectually. There is really no satisfying him. He roams the house as an ill-used bear with a sick headache, who at any moment might go for you and scratch you nicely.

He gives it us all pretty hotly, yet all his too-tooting, all

his needless worry—as if we did not do all we could for poor uncle Hyppolyth—is but an invincible proof that in his heart of hearts he is very fond of the invalid.

When the dear man—the sick uncle—is up and about again, the ill-used bear turns into a dignified man of the world, as sure as fate. Once again he will look right over the top of uncle Hyppolyth's bald head and act polite indifference. It is maddening, and true, and unavoidable.

We are always hoping for the best—the best never turns up. God hardens the hearts of the uncles.

It is not the day for vain regrets. Such a lovely sun-kissed morning—summer at her golden best.

True, the lilacs are over, and there is a great scarcity of roses, but to replace them we have the late jessamines in full bloom. Such a show on the mixed terrace ! all the glow and the glory of August flowers, clumps of mignonette, beds of purple mist, hollyhocks and nasturtiums, dwarf sunflowers and larkspurs, great vivid bushes of peonies, shading from palest pink to darkest crimson.

Above, the dappled sunshine and the wind-flecked shadows peeping in and out of the old trees.

The sunbeams seem to be in a sportive mood.

‘Come and admire us !’ they say to the gauzy shadows. ‘We are better than gold and lighter than thistledown. Look at the flowers, nodding their blessed heads ; we have clothed them in beauty, we have fed them in strength—we make alive !’

The wind—the soft marsh wind, smelling of wild thyme, clover, and yellow marsh lilies—carries their voices far, far away, beyond the green meadows and the river, past the village and the forest.

‘Waltzing shadows,’ the kindly sunbeams cry, ‘float away from the beloved rose-garden—pass gently by on the

other side. The last rose of summer still sleeps in her green bud, and the last rose out is ready to fall at a breath. The faded rose has not looked her last on her little world—she is still in love with life, deal gently with her ; spare her, strong wind of the marshes—give her another day to look upon the blue sky of her little world. The peonies can withstand your rough embrace—the sunflowers will scarcely stir at your approach—the green meadows, far away, will shiver with delight at your embrace—and every flowering clover plant will bend her head in thankfulness. . . .

A little cloud passed over the old apple trees—a little lilac-tinted cloud with a most transparent silver lining, sailing across the blue, blue sky.

For one short instant the sunbeams lost their confidence : not a sound was heard in the old garden, and the shadows deepened in the Broad Walk.

Only an instant—and then, bright as ever, strong as ever, the sun flooded the world again, seeking out the faces of the flowers, and tinting the dancing leaves of the old fruit trees—rather barren this year, but still so beautifully green.

I have been standing at my window, for some time, trying to attract the attention of two people walking slowly up and down the Broad Walk—without the slightest effect so far, so engrossed are they with each other.

The lady keeps her eyes on a level with the peonies ; the gentleman—much the taller of the two—is politely bending towards the lady trying to catch a glimpse of her face, beneath her shady bonnet. The lady seems to be doing all the talking—she has rather a shrill, high voice—and some of her words the marsh wind, smelling of wild thyme and yellow lilies, carries straight up to my window. Evidently the lady is enjoying herself.

Her laugh is so very catching that I feel inclined to laugh myself.

The passing of the lilac-tinted cloud made the engrossed couple look up.

Two waving hands are stretched towards me—one very tiny and the other, well, large.

It is uncle Dimitri and the oldest baby, walking—by a stretch of imagination—arm in arm, up and down the Broad Walk.

Uncle Dimitri is leading the oldest baby by his Malacca cane ; he stretches down, she stretches up—between them they just manage to do things comfortably.

The oldest baby—fat, fair, and three years old—belongs to Vera ; she is the head of the family and laughs shrilly if anyone—to her dimpled face—dares to call her a baby. There are two beneath her, so, of course, it is derogatory and quite out of place.

Uncle Dimitri is one of her warmest admirers ; he steals her whenever he can, and she lets herself be stolen with absolute confidence ; if he loves his lady—fat, fair, and three years old—she loves her giant, broad, splendid, and tall.

They make rather an odd couple walking arm in arm—by a stretch of imagination—for she is so very small, and he altogether a giant of fine proportions.

The oldest baby gurgles, with reciprocated admiration, when uncle Dimitri on solemn occasions—such as weddings—appears in gala uniform, to match her party dress, wearing all his orders to match her party bows.

Such a figure of a man ! his broad chest is only just broad enough to accommodate his numerous orders, medals, and stars—a blaze of past history and a brilliant career. We all agree, with the fat one, that he is a man well worth looking at. Has he not got four dazzling stars, the cordon

of St. Anne ? The oldest baby is nodding her head, under her pink-and-white sun-bonnet, so, of course, there is no doubt about it.

The oldest baby has lost her fleeting interest in aunt Jane, up above—undependable as water—two little pink palms are stretched lovingly towards a tomtit, sunning himself rather close to earth.

Uncle Dimitri counsels silence. With immense caution the two of them creep towards the delectable bird.

Will they catch him dozing ? Alack and alas ! the salt has been forgotten at home ; the fat baby stretches her pink palms in vain—the bird is on the wing, mounting higher and higher and higher. . . .

Down the great avenue of limes, full of tender twilight, I can just catch a glimpse of uncle Hyppolyth—a lonely uncle Hyppolyth, taking a solitary morning constitutional.

Something in the pose of his bent figure—taking the road, O so slowly—saddens me ; the reverse side of the medal—the ugly side of life's glory.

The Enemies never deliberately embarrass each other. When one is walking in the kitchen-garden, the other, with true politeness, will turn off towards the park.

I envy the fat baby. There is something in being a baby after all, even if you are only an elderly one—they are not alive to reason, they cannot grasp a sorrow one inch removed from their own important persons.

The oldest baby is willing enough to sob over her own personal grievances—she is more or less indifferent to the sorrows of others. Yet, I may be wronging her. I have seen her stroke Vera's hand, ever so gently, when she has had a headache. ‘Poor mummy—poor mummy,’ she will repeat very gravely ; there seems to be some heart in these little monsters of selfishness after all.

I wish I was an elderly baby.

Uncle Hyppolyth is not making much progress.

If I hurry I will catch him up in a minute and a half, and then uncle Dimitri will not look so conscious of having a lady all to himself. Two can play at that game !

CHAPTER XVI

THE FOREST

SUCH a day—such a day !

It seems to me this narrative is but a poor hymn to a gorgeous spell of weather !

Our picnic has passed off triumphantly. Everyone brought back their good tempers, and the oldest baby behaved as a brick, sleeping as placidly as a picture-baby on the return journey. None of the dilapidated umbrellas were needed, nor half the rugs stowed away in the family boat. The luncheon-baskets were brimming over with good things, and the big brass samovar, later on, supplied us with unlimited glasses of hot tea.

I expect some of us were a little tired when we walked up the last stretch of the steep approach to the house leading from the park landing-stage, and it required great youth, or great love, to turn off to the right, just to admire the sunset, seen best from the pillared temple, before returning home.

We left the sunset to Fanny and Sascha, watching them go without envy.

It has been a delightful day.

Already quite early in the morning when I was dressing I invoked the spirit of summer, in my most engaging style. I leaned out of my window and spoke up fearlessly.

‘ Stay where you are, dear Summer,’ I breathed ; ‘ hover over Russja-Kaja—our beautiful, shabby Russja-Kaja. We

do not really mind in the very least if you have a way of exposing her innocent makeshifts to look tidy and decent. Let me whisper, dear Summer, our weddings are something of a trial ; for such important occasions even the grove of statues is swept and garnished ; the wicked waste of good white sand—and useless labour ! Eternally, young Summer, stay where you are—do not be enticed by piping winds and stormy weather to leave us. You will be so sadly missed. We love you, dear Summer. Linger for ever close to us, and on those green hills far away. Impel the flowers to remain with you. Impel the sun to glitter on our house, and as a friendly face to beam on each of our particular windows. . . .'

Jay, jay of a callous Summer, to remain cold to such an impassioned appeal !

I know her nature—selfishness supreme—she only stays, wherever she happens to be, as long as it suits her own convenience.

She treats weather-prophets with scorn. At any moment she will be ready to turn her cold shoulder on Russja-Kaja, whisper good-bye to the ancient limes, laugh at the shivering birches, flit past the solemn firs—who really do not very much mind—and, heigh-presto, sail for England or any other happy island.

I suppose, really, we have no shadow of right to complain.

God, in His good time, has made a great many people, and He is still adding to the nations—but He has only made one sun. I suppose the sun is only doing her level best when she circles round the world—or do we circle round her ? I forget.

‘ Jane ! wherever on earth are you, Jane ? ’

Fanny’s raised voice, as a sharp knife, cut the thread of my reflections.

I ran to the mirror and settled my hat. I am a trial, I

know it. The very least persuasion and I am off to the land o' dreams—a most uncomfortable habit when other people are waiting.

Up the shallow stairs, three steps at a time, whirlwind Fanny rushed and burst into my room.

'The boats have been ready ever so long,' she breathlessly informed me. 'Uncle Dimitri has smoked his third cigarette. If you keep us waiting another moment, Anna Nicolajevna will remember so many things which have been forgotten that the boats will infallibly sink.'

She caught hold of my hand, the breathless Fanny, and we raced down the stairs in double-quick time.

We tore through the empty rooms—a short cut by the verandah steps, down the kitchen-garden, round by the stable-yard—all cuts—and never stopped running until we pulled up on the park bridge, very nearly colliding with old Mascha and sending her headlong into eternity.

'Saint Nicholas preserve us!' she cried, turning round and facing us, not a whit less pleased.

The whole household, including the cook and all the babies, were assembled on the landing-stage, watching with deep interest a flotilla of rowing craft—boats of all sizes and colours already filled up and waiting to start.

My boat, moored to the steps, was the only one without its due complement of rowers and passengers; only Sascha, so far, seated in it, looking the picture of resigned patience.

Two lengths away, Vera, in the *Beanstalk*, was splashing her light oars in the water, very workmanlike in her loose cambric dress and mushroom hat. She rows well.

The *Beanstalk* carries only one passenger, and Vera, with true cunning, had placed uncle Hyppolyth in the bows—a feather-weight man in his smart get-up, his tussore-silk coat, if you please, and his green-lined sun umbrella—the new one.

It is always a sign of summer when uncle Hyppolyth opens his green umbrella—the very sight of it ought to frighten the clouds away, it looks so cheery.

A gentle breeze was coquetting with the shivering water-grasses, which, in these shallow reaches, step well out from the shore.

A blue haze hung over the village, and a chaffinch, warbling on a tree close by, was watching the embarkation, and presumably checking the packages.

Ivan-horrible and Ivan-cross-eyed, for all their natural misfortunes a pair of stalwart, good-tempered lads, were seated at their oars in the family boat (steady as a rock), opposite uncle Dimitri. Uncle Dimitri is not particularly fond of pulling up-stream, and we none of us care to pull him. Poor uncle Dimitri, for two mortal sun-baked hours he has to face the horrible one and the cross-eyed one. He has his consolations ; from time immemorial uncle Dimitri has had the charge of the loose property peculiar to picnics : baskets of every size and shape, a pile of wraps sufficient to clothe all the monuments in St. Peter's (which is an exaggeration), divers worthless umbrellas, and throning above lesser things a huge samovar brazenly blinking in the sun.

Besides these treasures, uncle Dimitri had to-day two lady visitors—who arrived last night—and the oldest baby to make him completely happy.

Uncle Dimitri loves a baby, but I do not know if he is not equally attached to a pretty woman. Anyhow he flatters them both outrageously.

Vera does not approve of taking the oldest baby about, and only relented on this occasion, when uncle Dimitri volunteered as nursemaid.

In high glee—just as Fanny and I ran on to the bridge—the starched and frilled and sun-bonneted lady was lowered

into the family boat, and plumped down beside her dear giant. She only looked like a flower beside him, a rather fine pink rose in a lady's old-fashioned bouquet-holder.

Fanny naturally settled herself beside her fiancé, and I offered to row them, assisted by 'pretty-Sonjay,' a girl just built of muscles, and not a superfluous ounce of flesh on her bones. She had the straightest stroke I know of, only equalled by her smile, which never varies and is always there.

Poor dear Sascha was already contemplating his beautiful brown boots. In spite of innumerable patches my boat will continue to leak; I am perfectly aware of the fact, and also that she is the lightest cockleshell imaginable—a gem of a boat! This year she is all in white, with a scarlet hem, and except you look for her holes you would not discover them nor realise her extravagance in cotton-wool.

In honour of the occasion, pretty-Sonjay—who later on turned into the cook, setting out our table, lighting the samovar, keeping the new potatoes toasty hot in their wood ash-pit—was dressed in a regardless style. A brand-new green skirt, a dimity jacket, gorgeous as new paint and multi-coloured tulips. Two heavy plaits purposely escaped from beneath her sky-blue head-kerchief, tied low down on her sunburnt forehead. Pretty-Sonjay's complexion is burnt to a cinder. Woe betide her if she had treated the new potatoes in the same sinful manner.

Everyone was chattering—we never gathered together as deaf mutes at a funeral—talking, advising, and calling out parting words.

'Do make a start,' begged Anna Nicolajevna, who, much to our disgust, refused the party over the boiled eggs at early breakfast.

'No, my dears,' she said firmly. 'I am going for once to stay at home to keep tante Katja company.'

And tante Katja smiled and looked wise.

A great many of us knew that tante Katja was only a pretty pretence. Had not our mother of a set purpose discovered the delectable morning, a heaven-sent picnic morning, to conveniently get rid of us, so as to be free to superintend the 'dear fools' lugging down the spare bedding from the lofts, and to get her rooms in order for the influx of wedding guests expected in a couple of days ?

Anna Nicolajevna is a clever woman.

Tante Katja is of immense use in putting the finishing touches to everything. Anna Nicolajevna always assures tante Katja that Russja-Kaja would collapse as a house of cards, saving her nimble suggestions to avert such catastrophe. Our mother insists on having no memory, and being dependent on the good graces of the uncles and tante Katja.

They like her nice way of putting things, it makes them feel responsible, effective, and young—almost young.

Almost young ? What heresy ! Am I not convinced of eternal youthfulness ? Who would dare to deny the youngness of uncle Hyppolyth if they have once heard him dash off a gipsy air, or play a dreamy *berceuse* in his inimitable style ? Does he not, in fingering his loved violin, touch the bud of all things ? The little rabbit-eared branch of sprouting hawthorn ?

And tante Katja—with illuminating sincerity, her thoughts are ever drifting on the limitless seas of fancy. Always she remembers the romance of her youth, seen, maybe, through a haze of unshed tears. Dear young eyes, dim with unshed tears ! Tante Katja is humble-minded, but she is also proud.

At last Anna Nicolajevna realised her dearest wish, and we were off, the family boat—out of politeness to the visitors—leading the way. However, as I am truthful, I

must tell you that Vera, growing tired of company manners before we reached the Windmill rock, shot ahead, until the *Beanstalk* looked to us, creeping on behind, as a little green pod on the dancing water.

The river was almost blue to-day, the sky distinctly so—one vault of flawless azure, with just one or two frothy clouds whipped up against the horizon.

The wide tilled acres of Russja-Kaja looked very peaceful and very hot. Touching the blue the yellow fields of corn sloped away in the vague distance. Farther still, the ridge of the wilderness, packed trees melting into grey space.

The sun seemed to wrap the little village church in a special benediction ; her bright green roof, surmounted by a white cross, stood out bravely in the straggling village street head and shoulders above the straggling cottages. A Russian village is not much to boast of from a hygienic point of view, but it is picturesque seen from the middle of a broad river.

Our river is a beauty.

Propelled across from the opposite bank, we met and passed the ferry. It was laden with waggons and horses. The horses pricked their ears at sight of us, and the wagoners answered our call by a ringing cheer.

At the bend of the river we could still see the compact group on the park bridge. Our mother—conspicuous by her great height and her catching dress, white cotton sprinkled with red lozenges and finished with yellow lace—stood a little forward, waving the new baby in her arms, in default of a better signal.

Through a flutter of handkerchiefs Vera recognised the new baby's swaying robes, and considered it a mighty feasible plan to make some use of such an ornamental person.

Just before rounding the corner, by way of a parting salute, we raised our dripping oars on high, and set up a lusty part-song, led by the stalwart Ivans and taken up to a nicety by the fluty call of the whispering reeds.

Hosanna to the Lord Almighty for the breeze !

I assure you it is strenuous work pulling up-stream, even if you know that, coming back, the boat will practically glide down by herself. We so seldom do take life on these simple principles. Think if we could always pat ourselves when caught in a shower, by the thought that presently it will be very fine indeed. Why, trouble would run down to half its value, and no one would ever mind anything.

Do you remember the story of the dear old lady rowing against the wind, ‘ a good bit of a stretch ’ ? Pulling and pulling, she at last prayed to God that the wind might shift against her return. God granted her prayer.

There is a moral in that story.

Oh dear, oh dear, the limitations of the human mind ! I am not thinking of that blessed old lady at all, but of myself.

How can I bring before you the scent and the sound and the sight of the forest, just as it came before me to-day ?

It is horrible to have all your feelings bottled inside you, and not to find a single word worthy of their expression.

Words look so painfully mean on paper.

In my mind’s eye I can see the forest, living, gracious, lovely, and I would so dearly love to show her off.

To carry you off in the spirit, whirling, whirling away, alive with anticipation, and never a disappointment to the end of the chapter.

And here I am, with a couple of dozen cold words to choose from, and the most beautiful spot on earth waiting to be described.

It is maddening !

Well, well, from humbleness itself, let us start. Please to follow the party scrambling up a steep bank aglow with periwinkles and bushy wild phlox. We are taking the narrow, wooded path straight ahead ; a chequered path, full of sunlight and shadow, a gay little path, bordered by little gay trees, and all kinds of merry meadow-grasses. A pretty prospect—and no more. The outskirts of the forest hang on to the fringe of cultivation.

And here we have the singing-birds, birds who flutter away at our approach ; and up starts a hazel hen, at our very feet, in indignant haste. The oldest baby, from her proud seat on uncle Dimitri's magnificent shoulder, has spied a squirrel with eyes no less bright than her own ; her interest in the peeping squirrel has lost her the sight of a grey hare, leaping for dear life, down the cross-road ; in a twinkle he has vanished.

We break up into little groups. The servants have long since disappeared with the baskets. There is a touch of adventure in the air. The shadows deepen, the shadows cast by great trees upon wide spaces, massive boulders, riotous growth—mosses softer than velvet on which our footsteps silently sink.

It is as if we were advancing into the heart of unknown mystery.

After the heat and the glare of the river, the cool depths of the forest come as a welcome contrast. Another world indeed—a wonder-world.

There is something unspeakably grand in the sight of straight-spined firs topping to the skies, and every now and again breaking apart to let God's skylight through.

The visible presence of heaven gives a master touch to a temple not raised by hands.

Surely the winds of all mysteries lie enthroned above the green roofs of wild places ? Nature, left to herself, speaks

to us more closely of religion than all the robed priests of the world.

The patchy sunlight of a forest glade sets my heart beating. Had I the power I would sing, until someone caught me, pinned me to the ground, and told me to be quiet and listen.

A thousand voices are for ever whispering in the forest : the voice of hidden spaces ; the murmur of winged insects ; the moving tongues of myriad flowers—so faint, that you must touch your lips to their flower-mouths to hear them speak.

And over and above all the hoary age of the forest sends forth her insistent appeal. The sight of the gigantic trees, who have safely weathered decades of storm, the grey lichens—so slow of growth—the untold age of the massive rocks, and, maybe, the sight of a gushing stream old in herself, yet in appearance fresh as a bunch of dewy buttercups, fill one with wonder.

The lime-green saplings, the young berries, the tangle of undergrowths, the wild rose-bushes, circled by wild clematis and juniper brambles, the delicate ferns and the leafy bracken ; tendrils shooting out of mossy beds, a surprise carpet of blueberries, a grove of lilies of the valley, with their unborn buds waiting beneath the sod—all and everything a gift of God.

When we came upon the forest to-day we found her sleeping.

In the twilight we found her sleeping—the twilight of midday.

The bracken and the sensitive ferns, and all the young beauties, climbing and twining at the feet of the old trees, were sleeping.

The breeze was so slight, the heart of the forest so jealously guarded, that each living plant stood serene.

The wind of great spaces hushed her voice. No fairy piper piped his hollow reed. No light dancer from moonlight realms troubled the peace of the bluebells. Even if a white butterfly, poised on a blade of grass, rose and fluttered away, the changeless silence remained.

A wandering bee, losing his way in the dusk, clipped his wings closer to his body and tried to modulate his speed, conscious of the beauty of absolute repose.

Facing us, a solitary shaft of liquid sunshine penetrated the interlacing branches, drifted down the glade, and rested on Vera's red-gold hair. And the shadows all around deepened as the blue shades deepen on a field of snow.

The scent of the pines and the earthy smell of the mosses mingled with the perfume of ripe berries. Though past their bloom, the fragrance of lilies and violets still seemed to cling to the aromatic air—as the spirit of spring seemed to live in the white cups of the fragrant orchids. A touch of all the seasons rose to greet us. An invigorating breath of autumn played on the languorous warmth of summer. In the heart of a profound lake, yet no bigger than an inky pool—the haunt of fireflies and the home of pungent weeds—winter lay in the icy spring which fed her source.

A wonder-world our forest, and yet a dear and familiar friend. She woos us and overpowers us ; she gives us of her love ; she smiles at us and welcomes us and heaps us with treasures. She is famous for her mushrooms and her healing herbs ; her wild flowers are countless and her moods infinite.

The forest—the changeless forest—is never quite the same. Each fresh day paints her anew—a new scheme of light—and behold an entirely different effect.

Her secrets are very simple. No lordling power or feats of strength, no tossing of boulders or rooting of trees. The forest is content to deck a favourite stream with a fresh set

of pin-point grasses—the seats of mighty fays ; to strike up an arch of waving reeds ; to pattern a dark place with tell-tale forget-me-not eyes ; to extend the freehold of the insistent bluebells—by such slight means she satisfies her youthful vanity.

The forest loves all things young and gay. She looks up to her big trees, but she never despises the fruit of a wind-blown seed, garnered and treasured by a stony rock. There are many dwarf trees in the forest, poor, little stunted trees, growing in the cleft of a rock.

Consider the miracle of growth !

You who follow me through this land of beauty, pause a moment. I want to show you one of my favourite spots.

Rather a formidable place—tier on tier of wicked-looking stones ; great boulders, maybe hurled there in prehistoric times by the force of some graceless hurricane.

Great boulders yet clothed with airy finery ; one rock sporting legions of feathery ferns, with delicate, pencilled fronds ; another embedded in silver moss, which, seen at a distance, gleams as a sheet of glass ; yet another fantastically crowned by a plume of water, falling water, emitting a gentle, dripping sound refreshing and cool.

My favourite rock is rather bare, clean cut in half, smooth and black ; and growing on its shelving ledge stands a crooked birch.

The birch is ever bending forward, and her green leaves are ever trying to touch the cleft of the rock from which she has sprung.

How that great stone has watched over her little tree, her little starveling tree ; how anxiously she has followed her, step by step, through her journey in life.

The stone is everlastingly grateful to the hurricane, who gave her the seed of life ; who crowned her nakedness by quivering leaves and whispering song. By what means

does she nourish her wind-blown child?—in her stony bosom does she hide treasures of rich black soil? How else has her nurseling taken root and lived and flourished?

The little crooked tree is grateful for every grain of earth, for every sunbeam which comes her way!

The riches of the forest are denied her. She was born in a land of poverty—a wind-blown seed which fell on stony ground; but she grips on to life, she makes the most of all the mercies vouchsafed to her—she trembles with delight at spring, she loves the warmth of summer. All night long she breathes in the tonic air; she drinks of the dew of heaven; she is the chosen home of a company of birds; she is blessed—my dear little tree!

To-day I climbed upon the great rock and passed my hand over the frail trunk of the little birch tree.

If trees have feelings I am sure she was pleased—do not we all like attention?

Poor little starveling tree. I noticed upon the silver mosses of the jagged boulder the glitter of her tiny, pale yellow leaves.

Already she was beginning to turn colour. Away in the purple distance the great beeches showed no sign of decay. Even at this distance their verdant green branches showed up, against the dark-hued firs, in the very heyday of their glory; great-limbed giants—I hated their perfection! Their very strength seemed to insult the pride of the rock.

I suppose to the end of her life the little tree will always be delicate; the last to bud in spring, the first to fade in autumn. She must require her long winter sleep and her warm covering of snow. As the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb, so Nature spares her humble ones; out of her illimitable wisdom she treats them kindly.

Weaving these things together—such loosely strung fancies that I am half afraid they are not worthy of remem-

brance—I fell asleep, pillowing my head close to the drooping birch.

When I opened my eyes—just as in a fairy story—I saw Prince Charming standing down below and watching me with a smile upon his handsome face.

He was looking up at me, wondering who the sleeping princess in the enchanted wood could be.

And she—she climbed to her knees, and bent over the edge of her tiny kingdom—a yard or two of silver moss and one starveling tree ; such a poor little kingdom.

The princess rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. I believe she turned a rosy rosy red—I know she felt very shy. For a fluttering second she wondered, wondered whoever the Prince could be, and where she had seen him !

Then her eyes—free of sleep—met his, and in a flashing heart-beat she knew.

Giving her hand to her English cousin, she jumped lightly down to his side.

CHAPTER XVII

A PICNIC AND A PROPOSAL

'DARLING,' murmured Anthony, 'I have come a long way in search of you, and I love you and you have got to marry me.' He held me closely in his arms. 'Kiss me, Jane. Is it not good to be alive ?'

I think I whispered 'Yes,' and maybe the trees in the chequered background answered in one breath, 'We agree'; but I could not swear to it. I only know I have never felt so happy as at the moment when Anthony told me of his love, beneath the shadow of the little birch tree. And that Anthony's natural reserve was whipped out of sight and out of mind; he let himself go with all the confidence of an accepted lover.

'Oh, Anthony,' I whispered when he allowed me to speak, 'of course I love you !'

It is something to wake up in an enchanted forest and to find happiness waiting patiently for you, within touch and sound of your own little circle. Happiness was never built on broad lines, nor love, nor anything acutely personal. The world narrows down to an infinitesimal point in love's horizon. 'You and I and the wide, wide sea'—it is horrible to think of the shipwrecks.

'Jane,' said Anthony, drawing a deep breath, 'my own little girl, will you ever realise how much I love you ?'

I nodded my head and looked from the little birch tree to my tall cousin. And the wind whispered of many things.

And summer rose to the height of perfection, and peace walked the tranquil earth. How good of God to have planned everything so beautifully ! Love has her place and season ; love may be very good at forty, but at eighteen she is so exquisitely alive. At eighteen life seems a very straight journey, a straight road bordered by light eternal—given but a fragment of health and good spirits.

It is good to find each other—so good ! Had the forest king (every forest has her king as every piece of water her mermaid-housemaid, who disentangles the floating weeds and polishes the rosy shells), had his majesty come out of his fortress breasted by diamonds, cut and flashing, and flung them into my lap with a ‘There, girl, take your baubles,’ I would have obeyed, with no surprise and scarcely a thank you. And had the tidy mermaid, in flattering imitation, whipping her tail to right and left, crawled to my feet, murmuring, ‘Jane, dear Jane, I have collected, for two hundred years, these matchless pearls for you. I knew you would require them one day, Jane.’ I would have taken them, without noticing the poor mermaid’s tears or her poor bruised tail, and would have twined the gleaming strings around my sunburnt throat and sold every gem for one of Anthony’s kisses. And that is really setting a high price on love from a worldly point of view. Anna Nicolajevna has never brought us up for the world. I suppose that is why we make such good matches.

‘What a glorious day it is !’ said I. ‘Look at the light down that glade, and the wilderness to your left. Did you ever see such imposing rocks ? And please look at my property, my little birch tree. I have annexed that tree as lawless people do in America. I am so glad you found me here——’

‘My own precious !’

‘So the little tree will have something nice to dream

of when she is left all alone, half-buried in the snow. We never come here in winter—the forest is very lonely in winter and very silent. You must not laugh at me or I will hate you.'

'Don't hate me, Jane, even in fun!'

'I could not, even if I tried,' I said truthfully.

After a time Anthony became insistent. 'When are you going to marry me?'

'We must not talk of a wedding for years and years,' I said.

'They will have to be fairy years, little dewdrop years which melt away in the sunshine of love ever so fast. Life is a short business, Jane.'

'Is it?' I said, not quite believing him.

He smiled and held me at arm's length. 'What a pretty little child it is,' he said. 'Next spring—'

I shook my head tragically. The future grew suddenly grave and my responsibilities heavy. 'Think of Anna Nicolajevna—think of the uncles and the long, long winter evenings—candles at two and nine sharp in the morning—no daughter at home to amuse them. The twins do not count; they do not play whist, and they take no interest in backgammon!' I am afraid I was but a poor spokeswoman for Lady Duty—my voice lacked heart. Bah! What a selfish little pig; and mother with her great heart, and the dear uncles.

'I don't either,' said Anthony, 'but I take a certain amount of interest in myself. How many years do you propose playing backgammon for the benefit of your family?' He put the question in a judicial manner.

I sighed. 'Would five be too many?' I asked in a small voice.

'By no means, if you do not care for me.'

I rose to the bait, a hungry little fish. ‘Of course, I care; I care very much.’

‘Then why are we talking nonsense?’

‘It is not nonsense!’

‘In five years I will be an old man.’

‘That is nonsense,’ I said briskly.

‘And you—Jane?’

I did not look at him. ‘A little older, a little staler, perhaps a very thin young woman—or an angel.’ I sobbed on the last note. The angels did not appeal to me in the slightest. I could not fancy Anthony wearing great massive wings—he is neither devil nor angel, Anthony, but just a proper man. A tall, well-set-up, handsome, wholesome man who appreciates poetry. I would not give a fig for a matter-of-fact steel king or an iron magnate, or whatever consolidated wealth stands for. True, dear Guns has oceans of money, but then, he is such a simple soul. Anthony is another—there is a lot in breeding and in inheritance. Of course, great-great-grandmother Sylvia was bound to have a thoroughly decent descendant, or the theory of heredity would squeeze out as a damaged pump.

‘Coo-e, coo-e,’ whistled a bird close by; a shaft of sunlight threaded her way across the mossy turf and fell at my feet. Such a golden, healing, strong hour!

I climbed down a bit. ‘Anyhow, we must keep our secret until the wedding is over,’ I declared.

‘You are the darlingest girl in all the world,’ declared Anthony.

So sweet of him! He must have seen a good many girls. I hung my head and blushed. ‘Anthony, have you ever cared for anyone else?’

No hesitation on his part. He knelt at my feet and kissed my hands. ‘Don’t grow up, darling; don’t, if you love me.’ Was it an answer to my question?

'I will do anything you like,' I said gaily. I fancied I saw a shadow in Anthony's blue eyes and I felt horribly *gauche* and tactless. Some of Vera's maxims came dancing into my mind, but I drowned them at once. I smiled down at him in beautiful confidence. He looked so splendidly reliable. The beauty of my fate did not stagger me in the least. 'I love you, and nothing else counts.' Who spoke? Was it a duet of two happy people with a wealthy chorus behind? Or did one voice the other's thoughts, and the sun sparkle on both? I leave it to you.

'What will tante Hélène say,' I said presently, 'when she hears of our engagement?'

'Bless 'em!'

'Don't be so sure. She likes to manage, and she does it pretty well considering. Sascha—'

'Leave him out.'

'You have got to appreciate him now, Anthony. Is he not tiresome? Was he not odious in the boat?'

'What an appreciation!' laughed Anthony.

I looked at him seriously. 'What a good thing you hunted up your great-great-grandmother's letters—'

We talked of Sylvia's home in far-away Kent, and of Anthony's mother, and some of his people, but most of all of ourselves.

'You have got to show me everything,' said I.

'Yes, darling,' said Anthony, looking the picture of lazy content. 'Look at the blue touch over there—it is wonderful.'

'Every year we will come back, and in and between we will travel. I want to see all the cities marked in big letters on the map of the world; if we work methodically when I am sixty we will reach Melbourne. Don't you love looking forward?'

'Not at present. This is such a blessed moment. What an ass I have been not to have found it out before. How long have I been at Russja-Kaja ?'

'You came in June—three months, or nearly three months. Time does fly when one is happy. To think that we have only known each other such a short while !' I closed my eyes, shutting out the daylight, shutting in my thoughts.

Anthony broke the silence by quoting from Sylvia's diary. (Is it disrespectful to speak of your great-great-grandmother without a prefix ?) We all know her verses by heart. She never tells us how she came by them. She copied them out in her perfect handwriting for the benefit of her children. Old poetry—very old—simply signed 'P. A.' and then the date, all within a decade—1650–60. Some fragments of 'P. A.'s' original manuscript remain—just to puzzle us all the more. Who was he ? Echo answers echo. Who was he ?

'Love is a jewel, dear,
Shining white and clear
As a gem of old
Set in beaten gold.'

'Love is a beacon, dear,
Guiding the ship of two
Across the shoals of night
Into the morning light.'

'Love is a bell, my dear,
Tuned to many parts ;
Love rejoices, dear,
Love can condole as well.'

'Love lies a-bleeding, dear,
When death steps in awhile,
Until two hearts together
Are lost to earth for ever.'

The breeze rippled through the trees playing the accompaniment to the old love-song—ever new and fresh as life itself.

'Love lies a-bleeding, dear,
When death steps in awhile,
Until two hearts together
Are lost to earth for ever.'

I repeated the last verse softly, and then I looked up at the sightless stars of day, and I thought of Anna Nicolajevna.

'Oh, Anthony,' I said, 'we don't matter.' He kissed me very gently. I am sure he understood me. Love is not blind !

At that moment Vera's white dress fluttered in the beech grove, and Vera's fine voice was raised in a powerful shriek. 'Jane, Jane.' (Jane is a splendid name for concert pitch.)

'Here I am—hallo !' called Jane. 'I and Anthony have been talking.'

'Silly creatures,' called Vera. 'It is time to eat. They have all begun, couldn't wait for you any longer.'

'I am so sorry.'

'Anthony, race on—first turn to the left—and say we are coming.'

'Right you are.'

When Vera and I some minutes later joined the family party Sascha looked at me rather suspiciously. He was seated by Fanny on a rug, very carefully peeling a potato—for himself. 'Some salt, please, Fanny,' he said; 'thank you. And where have you been hiding, Jane ?'

'I was only round the corner with Anthony,' I said simply, looking, I hope, the picture of innocence.

'So,' said Sascha. He can put a power of expression in

that one little syllable. In Fanny's place I would later on strike out that word in the home vocabulary. Poor darling Fanny, when I compare Anthony and Sascha it does seem hard lines on her. I thought as much as I took my place beside uncle Dimitri, and I remember at the very moment admiring Fanny's dazzling smile as she looked at sober Black Beard. Love is the strangest complaint on earth, and I will be bound there is no living soul on earth who does not want to catch it.

How we enjoyed, each in our own way, that excellent meal in the forest ; happiness ruled the feast. Uncle Dimitri made way for me without upsetting his plate of chicken pie or moving the eldest baby, eating sponge-cakes in the crook of his arm (a most conscientious nurse-maid, uncle Dimitri). Vera settled herself full length on her back on the turf and opened her mouth like a fledgling sparrow. 'Feed me, please,' she said. Sascha carefully brushed a crumb off his white drill waistcoat and looked the other way. I am afraid he thinks he is marrying into a vulgar family. Aristocracy is not always a hall-mark of gentility in these days. Kasimir uncorked a small bottle of soda-water, and creeping up behind Vera he tried to fit the neck of the bottle into her mouth.

'Please, I am choking,' said she. She turned right over and buried her face in the mossy turf, kicking her little heels in the air.

'Look at mummy,' said the solemn baby.

'You are setting an awful example for that child,' said Anthony.

At that Vera came to her sense of duty. She jumped briskly over Anthony's long legs and began slicing the tongue and hunting for the strawberries. Kasimir fetched the bottle of cream, cooling in the brook. The sun flickered through the trees and burnt yellow on the open space in

front of us. Youth was at the party (chiefly represented by uncle Hyppolyth) and love and health and good temper and pure joy—and what more can you want in the heart of a summer forest ? A warm, scented forest which belongs to you ! Believe me, the last clause is of much value ; it is very nice picnicking on someone else's velvet mosses and listening to the gurgle of someone else's mountain streams, but when it all belongs to you, part and parcel of your life and living, the score is multiplied ten times ten.

After our unromantic meal—a cold luncheon walled by unlimited hot potatoes is prosaic, whatever you may say—we sat about lazily, content to do nothing. No one moved. The fat baby settled her head deeper into her sun-bonnet, and went to sleep at uncle Dimitri's feet. I believe many of us were willing to follow her example. Sascha took no pains to hide a yawn. ‘So,’ he said, to some remark Fanny made him, and accepted with a bow a cigarette from Guns. All the men of the party smoked, as a matter of course, and Vera kept them company, more out of kindness than anything else. We girls have never taken to smoking, which is rather a blessing, says Anthony.

It is glorious to leap into womanhood. Surely until we love we are as dead, or at least as little children ? Sitting beneath the greenwood trees, with the scattered sunlight at our feet and a wealth of blue roses climbing up to the very sky itself—for all who cared to look—we were well placed.

‘I have been marching towards this all my life,’ whispered Anthony in my ear, as he came and sat down beside me, ‘and I have never half realised my good fortune.’

‘This time last summer,’ said I prosaically enough, ‘we hardly knew of each other’s existence.’

‘Are you sure, Jane ? Did you never dream of love ?’

'I don't think so, and if I did I never understood it. Love is a very personal matter ; neither dreams nor books can teach love.'

'Right you are, dearest. Love is the true test of life. Child, I am ever so fond of you !'

Someone suggested a game, probably in playfulness. It was far too hot to run about. No one seconded the proposal.

'I will tell you a story,' said Anthony, 'with a good honest truth in the heart of it.'

'That would be delightful,' said uncle Hyppolyth.

'Please,' said Olga.

'We will skip a deal,' said Anthony. 'What is the good of imagination if you can't fill up gaps ? Once upon a time there was a beautiful Eastern princess, who lived in tremendous luxury and ease. The whole palace kotowed to her—'

'What is that ?'

'Made a fuss about her, obeyed her least wish. She had not many wishes. She was very beautiful and very young and very bored. The court doctor whispered if nothing roused the princess she would snuff out—'

'What is that ?'

'What a bore you are, Jane. You must learn English, and don't interrupt, please.'

'Forgive me.'

'I'll try to.'

'And what was it ?'

'What—'

'Snuff—'

'Snuff old gentlemen sneeze on—'

'I thought it was a young princess—'

'She was going to die—'

'How dreadful.'

'She did not, Jane. She fell in love instead, and lived happily ever afterwards ; but between her ultimate fate and the time she was snuffing out the Story Teller had a bad time of it. It was his duty to entertain and, if possible, to interest the princess. Every evening he would sit cross-legged in front of her, his great white beard sweeping his thin chest, and tell her the most lovely stories. "To-night," he would say to himself, "she will surely lean forward from her throne of pearls, and her pale face will flush as a tea-rose in the rays of the setting sun." Even a Story Teller can be an optimist. "Oh, princess," he would commence, "so it happened in the garden of Dear Delight."

'Sometimes she showed a faint interest in his histories, or a touch of surprise, but as a rule the colour never mantled her pale cheeks, nor did she raise her listless eyes.'

'She must have been a little beast,' said Kasimir.

'No, she was only a spoilt young lady.'

'And what is the difference—'

'Go on,' said Vera, laying her hand on Kasimir's mouth.

'One day a stranger arrived at the court of the king her father. She who had never before noticed a man without picking out his faults and refusing him point-blank—'

'What is that ? '

'Jane ! '

'Sorry.'

'She fell in love with the stranger.'

'Was he nice-looking ? ' asked Fanny.

'Of course, Fanny. Is not beauty nine points of the law ? A handsome fellow has such an advantage. This man pushed his advantage home, and got the princess to promise to marry him three days after his arrival. No one realised how the miracle had come about—the miracle of love.'

'The princess was quite a changed being; no longer listless and indifferent, she took a vast interest in life; she kissed the children, she behaved most courteously to everyone she met, she admired every single object shown her, and was grateful for the least attention.'

'So,' said Sascha.

'The Story Teller, who lived in his own imagination, which is only natural, paid no attention to the current gossip of the day. He did not care if the princess had grown unaccountably gentle and kind and ten times more beautiful than of old. As a listener he knew she was rotten.'

'What is that?'

'Rotten. The Story Teller was so desperately fed up that he resolved to tell her the baldest story in his whole collection. He was not going to waste his breath or his eloquence on a dense young woman. The evening when he had arrived at this wise decision he scowled as he took his place at the feet of the princess, and he never noticed how she gently guided him with her outstretched hand, nor how her cheeks were flushed with happiness.

"One day, princess," he began, "in a city, a cold western town where the grimy smoke steals the colour from the sky, and where people are always busy, Gretchen perceived Ludvig staring at her through the area rails—",

'What is that?'

'Spikes. "'How warm she looks,' thought poor Ludvig. (It is cold work dusting the streets with a north-east wind biting your face.) One day the cook had gone out, in her best green bonnet trimmed with a parrot's feather, and Gretchen was sitting alone by the kitchen window sewing buttons on to a blue apron. She was very industrious and very red in the face. The great kitchen fire flared behind her, and the kitchen cat purred on the hearthstone, and

seven great copper saucepans blinked and winked at Gretchen as if to thank her for having polished them so splendidly. In a corner the old grandfather clock ticked with great regularity.

"The sight of that pleasant kitchen was as paradise to Ludvig, standing out in the cold with his pinched nose fixed between the area rails. At last he took his courage in both hands, stepped bravely down the kitchen stairs, and knocked loudly on the kitchen door.

"Come in," said Gretchen.

"Ludvig walked straight up to the girl and pulled off his beaver hat; it was a very dusty hat, splashed with finger-marks.

"Good afternoon," he said in his full voice.

"Good afternoon," said Gretchen very precisely. Nothing ever surprised her. She was not even taken aback when the cook praised her apple tart.

"I have just been thinking," said he.

"Yes," said Gretchen.

"Could not we two marry?"

"Well, I have never thought about it."

"Oh!"

"It might not answer." She bit off her thread and threaded her needle.

"No, it might not." He shifted his position and brought one foot heavily forward and stared at his big boot.

"Well, if you won't marry me, will you give me a kiss instead?"

"A kiss—what is that?" asked she (of course she knew).

"Then an idea struck him; he went up to a fine coloured picture of a fine young girl in national dress, which hung on the wall facing the seven blinking and winking sauce-

pans. He kissed the picture with a sounding smack.
‘That’s a kiss !’ said he.

“‘‘‘ Is it ?’ she said. ‘ Wait a moment. I must finish off this button ; it does not look unpleasant, and it might be pleasant. What is your name ? ’

“‘‘‘ Ludvig.’

“‘‘‘ Your occupation ? ’

“‘‘‘ I am a dustman.’

“‘‘‘ You look—well, never mind.’

“‘‘‘ What is your name ? ’

“‘‘‘ Gretchen.’

“‘‘‘ What do you do ? ’

“‘‘‘ Everything.’

“‘‘‘ Are you ready ? ’

“‘‘‘ Quite,’ said she, and wiped her mouth carefully.

“‘‘ That is the end of the story, O princess,” said the Story Teller.

“‘‘ How delightful, how beautiful, how charming ! ” cried the princess. “‘ A thousand grateful thanks ! I will never forget it, I will always treasure it in my heart. Poor Ludvig, poor Gretchen ! Oh, I hope the cook was kind to them, and that she made them a beautiful cake. What an entrancing story ! Is there anything so divine as love ? ” She bent towards the Story Teller, holding out her beautiful hands, her lovely eyes full of tears. “‘ Come again,” she said gently. “‘ Now I want to dream.”

“‘‘ Princess,” said the old man, in the greatest astonishment, “here have I, night after night, told you of my best—the story of the Seven Sisters, the Grove of Enchantment, the One Desire, the King’s Cup-bearer, the Glory of the World—all left you unmoved, and this, the poorest story in my whole collection, gives you pleasure.”

‘ A hush fell on the scented garden. Only a nightingale

lifted his voice in the woods close by. And in their marble basins the clear waters played.

"Forgive me, O Story Teller," answered the princess very humbly. "I never understood them."

Sascha was the first to break the silence. 'Is that all?' he asked.

'Is it not enough?' said Anthony rather gruffly. 'Find the plum, dear fellow, and suck it to your heart's content.'

'There is no plum,' said Sascha.

'No more there is,' said Anthony.

'Why, it is as large as life,' said uncle Hyppolyth. 'Love is the golden key to reason and to all understanding.'

Sascha adjusted his waistcoat, always a sure sign that he is cross. He looked at uncle Hyppolyth, and wisely made no direct reply.

'Fanny,' said he, 'let us take a walk.'

Fanny got up at once and accepted Sascha's arm. Oh, she is cut out for a patient Griselda! But all the same she is a little fool.

CHAPTER XVIII

FANNY'S WEDDING

THIS week no one has dared to tread on the paths, for fear of spoiling them.

All the Ivans and all the Sonjays have, as a matter of course, stepped upon the grass if business has taken them in a certain direction.

McArthur, who, in the ordinary course of events, would clap the top-hat closer to his head, and whistle out condemnatory remarks to such gross disobedience, accepts the inevitable: impossible to walk, even with the light tread of a dancer, on a freshly raked path without spoiling it with tell-tale footprints.

It is the penalty of loose sand.

Yesterday McArthur positively glared at the middle baby—who belongs to Marussa—as she came toddling towards him down the very centre of the Broad Walk, just done. Such tiny footprints in the sand, and one blue shoe coming off—uneven footprints to worry his mind.

Gingerly stepping behind the gooseberry bushes, McArthur made a long arm of it, picked up the missing shoe and the middle baby and handed them both over to Marussa.

'Children do a power o' mischief,' he remarked gloomily. Marussa looked suitably conscience-stricken.

Fanny's lucky star is in the ascendant. If the evening holds her promise, she will walk dry-shod to-morrow to church, the first step on the immaculate paths.

At Marussa's wedding the weather behaved abominably. The wedding party had just started for church, when a violent storm worked havoc all round ; utterly ruined the white satin ribbons tied on the triumphal arches—thoroughly crossed McArthur's holiday temper—grave but kindly—took the flag, floating over the big house, into rags—brought down the remaining chimney on the Swiss chalet with such a terrific bang that the noise of its falling frightened some of the ladies into forgetting the damage done to their best dresses.

As we all huddled together on the ferry the better to protect ourselves, waves broke over the sides, and the poor bride got her feet drenched, looking out for her train.

Anna Nicolajevna's wreath of red roses on her magnificently dressed head got badly splashed, some of the colour coming off ; the pearls on her bodice garniture have never recovered the shock—they were literally broken by the hailstones.

We ran under cover, splashing through the mud, regardless of our pale satin slippers and our light ball dresses.

Conforming to the rules of our country, we were all in ball attire. There is something rather awe-inspiring about full dress in broad daylight, and worn by every age.

The storm cleared up suddenly. By the time we were out of church the heavens had struck an extra note in the scheme of decoration.

Facing the company, against the watery blue of the shifting sky, a fine rainbow appeared and pleased us mightily.

As Marussa stepped under the spanned arch in the grove of the gods, a ray of sunshine poured over Venus—a blinding flash of unexpected light. The soaked ribbons fluttered in the air—drying nicely.

If there were pools on the sodden sand, and all the

lovely pattern gone—why, it is folly to ask too much of life ! The sight of the rainbow growing every minute more distinct sent our spirits up by leaps and bounds. At dinner roars of laughter followed each other in quick succession, and no one caught an abiding cold. We trembled for uncle Hyppolyth's chest. Not all his orders saved uncle Dimitri from a scowl ; his second bumper of champagne, and the best man's felicitous speech, set his face to rights —a beaming and smiling uncle Dimitri rose from that excellent repast.

The presents come in handy.

During the past week traffic has been heavy on the road. As I have told you before, Anna Nicolajevna is averse to spending ready money. At the time of weddings she relaxes her rule, and gives her patronage to the local tradesmen with a lavishness born of imprudence, a generous desire to honour our guests.

Each shop in supplying her orders tenders a gift, much as a pastry-cook will add a cake to every dozen—if he is at all a generous fellow.

We get a variety of offerings, from cut flowers—which make McArthur snort—to a roll of dusters or a side of bacon ; Spanish grapes and dried figs, lithograph pictures of the Imperial Family—really, there is no end to their ingenuity.

The dairyman, who buys our butter, sent a herd of yearlings yesterday scampering, in sheer terror, across the paddock, at the sight of him doubled up on a bicycle, with a live goose, pinioned behind, shrieking spasmodically.

It really was a funny sight. The little dairyman, with a patriarchal beard, red as fire, crouching on his machine, pedalling past for dear life, with a great live goose strung up behind.

On delivering his Present he told Anna Nicolajevna he had not killed it, as she might prefer to keep it alive.

You may be sure he got many thanks, a glass of excellent vodki, and a set meal. Anna Nicolajevna never does anything by halves, and she can take a present beautifully.

The Present is being kept alive. The housekeeper said she did not require him. For weeks past our own poultry have been told, by full measure running over, what is expected of them. If they were dense—I expect they only grasped the horrible meaning yesterday.

Last night the larder was full of larded corpses. All the morning the kitchen-maids had been hard at work plucking feathers. To-morrow the great ovens will be heated—there is such a commotion going on in the kitchens !

The goose upset poor dear Guns. Sitting in the garden in the midst of a select company, which included Jane, he sucked the head of his cane mournfully, pondering over the logic of ladies in general and our mother in particular.

'She will accept a goose from any queer beggar,' he said, 'but not as much as a quill from me—it is monstrous !'

'Hush !' said little Olga, laying a pink palm over the mouth of her husband, and looking carefully around ; 'don't be wicked ! You know we do her !'

Oh, the infinite and awful emphasis of little Olga's voice—' You know we do her !'—worthy of the queen in Macbeth, enough to jellify anyone's blood.

And Guns laughed in his jolly, good-tempered style, feeling, in his small way, that he was the villain of the piecc.

The hero is, of course, McArthur. McArthur the good, the just, the righteous—who 'will have no pairt or parceel in fuling her Excellency.'

Ostensibly he refuses to give us away, but he manfully continues to toil and wear the skin off his fingers in his

endeavour to fatten the Green Box on a strictly honest diet.

Anna Nicolajevna says she refuses another wedding—the worry is simply too awful. If her remaining girls want to marry they must follow the example of their great-great-grandmother Sylvia. She (mother) never feels happy until the bridal pair are safely under way, in the specially chartered steamer—she shows it by standing on the park bridge and crying copiously.

In her heart of hearts she hates losing us.

Certainly we have had our worries this time—not even Anthony has been able to avert the evil eye following Mademoiselle Cleo.

The wedding dress is completed, shrouded in sheets, hanging on a high peg in the loft, facing the gory picture and the stuffed birds. If you brush against the looped-up train, it will swing for a long time, and all the disused furniture will chuckle. Poor creatures, they so seldom have anything fresh to look at!

Nothing has moved upstairs this time. We never even proposed furnishing a room in honour of Sascha—he was not worth it.

I will tell you about Sascha's behaviour when I have finished with Cleo—the unutterable, pig-headed Cleo.

It all came from lobsters—small lobsters; she loves small lobsters, and they disagree with her. Cleo has a weak digestion and a strong will.

Well, last night she ate her lobsters for supper, enjoyed them, went to bed, had a disturbed night—visited by nightmare.

In the morning Cleo informed us she had had an inspired dream. The dream had told her that the going-away dress would be vastly improved by insertions of 'toned' lace.

Nothing we said altered her ecstatic vision. How we

flattered that plain grey voile over blue satin ! With a Joan of Arc expression in her beady eyes Mademoiselle sat down, crossed her knees, and commenced cutting open the wretched dress. Wilful woman will have her way even at the eleventh hour—take my word for it, never employ a dressmaker who suffers from inspired dreams at the last moment.

To-morrow is The Day. She, Cleo, is feverishly busy building up the ruins of a pretty dress—the toned lace is rather effectually drawing things together—but will she get done in time ? Must we kiss Fanny good-bye, on the special, knowing she is pinned up underneath her old dust-coat ? The problem will very likely cause Anna Nicolajevna a sleepless night. Fanny is very good about it, and, wise child, she has refrained from mentioning to Sascha this new menace to his completed happiness. He is such a tidy man, he would never take a pinned-up bride on his wedding journey—he would rather go alone.

There is no doubt about it, there is vast room for improvement in Sascha's character.

At the present moment he is probably contemplating his polished nails with bitter rage. He does not approve of being slept out, and he loathes the Swiss chalet.

We have to conform to tradition. It is considered unlucky for the prospective bride and bridegroom to sleep under the same roof on their wedding eve. Is it likely we would send Fanny away—her last evening at home ?

We, every one of us, after supper—a very dark night—escorted the reluctant Sascha to his sleeping quarters. Mother, the uncles, tante Katja, the children, and a horde of visitors—we were a merry party in the gloomy park. Some of us carried lanterns—all of us carried good spirits, all except the bridegroom-to-be.

The Swiss chalet looked a trifle eerie, and none too

steady—but it is so convenient ! One room, at the back, bears moderate walking. I ask you—is Sascha the kind of man likely to dance a jig all by himself ? We left him, staring out of his little window, in perfect confidence.

He did not even try to look agreeable. He perfunctorily kissed his manicured fingers to the company, waving them elegantly as an afterthought.

There is really no danger of a catastrophe. The agent has propped up the flooring of the bachelor's room with good stout poles, and Sascha had the weather with him—a breathless night, the artificial lake calm as a sheet of glass. A few hooting owls about—but they do not send a tottering house, face foremost, into slimy waters ; probably the thought which lay behind Sascha's contracted smile.

The bachelor's room is sparsely furnished—not to add to the weight on the floor—a bed, a table, a chair, a strip of carpet, and a little candle.

Anna Nicolajevna lighted the candle.

Sascha bowed.

The last glimpse we had of the martyr to convention showed us, behind the narrow window, a pallid young man, who, with delicate fingers, was turning over the leaves of a book. He had taken a book with him. Fanny supposed it to be a copy of Byron. Byron is her favourite poet—she considers his face so beautiful. Far more likely to have been a book of law. Sascha is just the man to study criminal jurisdiction on his wedding eve.

In comparison with former days, our weddings are very poor shows. It took quite a fortnight, sometimes five weeks, to marry or to bury a respectable fellow—and very solid feeding and very hard drinking escorted him either way.

His friends stood by him to a man.

Here is an extract from my favourite historian, the

Rev. Dr. John Trusler—"nothing advanced but on the best authorities."

"When a corpse is dreft, a priest is fent for, to pray for its foul, to purify it with incense, and sprinkle it with holy water.

"After keeping it eight or ten days above ground, thus purifying it daily, the priest produces a ticket, figned by the bishop, and another clergyman, as a paſsport to Heaven, and the body is carried to the grave, with gesticulations of sorrow. Being interred the mourners return, and drown their sorrow in intoxication; which, among the opulant, laſts with few intermiffions for 40 days."

Sleep had but a poor look-in at these solemn festivals, the bedding being quite inadequate to the company, numbering several hundred guests. Sleeping on chairs was considered uncomfortable, besides being poor-spirited.

Want of sleep reacted in a ravenous manner on the appetites of the guests. They consumed incredible quantities of food and drink, both at funerals and at weddings; at the weddings they danced their victuals down at stated intervals. They must have suffered terribly from indigestion at the funerals. I imagine dancing was considered bad form with a corpse in the house.

However, as Mascha tells us, who in a modified degree enjoyed old-time hospitality, in her young days both funerals and weddings were cut down to a bare fortnight—burials were hard to beat, they were grand!

I cannot quite agree with her; from all accounts the weddings were deliriously joyful. Imagine fourteen days of incessant merry-making, incessant eating, incessant dancing! Lives there a girl—a very young girl—who does not prick her ears at the last clause, devoutly wishing she had been a bridesmaid to her own grandmother?

Each morning during the fortnight of her life the bride appeared, in the assembly-room, in a new dress, the centre of attraction. I believe they started with a couple of waltzes before breakfast, and got through two ordinary ball programmes before the midday meal. The whole afternoon was devoted to dancing—then a great dinner, followed by more dancing, dancing which went on until the small hours. By this time the ballroom, a whirl of dust—the laughter somewhat subdued—the aged parties eyeing the arm-chairs lovingly (the aged parties were all poor-spirited towards six in the morning on the thirteenth day). Even the young people backed up against the walls and did themselves well on strong tea. Human nature is human nature, and human nature is limited.

The happy bride, the most popular girl in the room—I can fancy her breathing heavily, weighted by her marriage crown and her barbaric jewellery, either crimson or white as a sheet in the face, according to her constitution—watching her friends whirling round, taking a brief, a very brief rest.

Stamp—stamp—stamp ! The fiddles are almost drowned by the sound of moving feet—a haze over the place—insufficient lighting and unspeakable ventilation. Mascha often danced in a maze—she did not see her fellow-guests, or the lights, or the floor. She had no idea in her head but that she was there—to dance. . . . Stamp—stamp ! Nothing interfered with the monotonous stamping of tired feet on the dusty floor—nothing except food—Lord a mercy !

Anna Nicolajevna has modified our weddings. On the third day—when the tenantry have a supper—we are considered creditably married.

‘ Seven o’clock in the morning,’ sang a thrush from some-

where—he seemed very pleased about it. ‘Seven o'clock in the morning.’

I have been standing by my open window—dressing by fits and starts—listening to the church bells a-pealing, admiring the decorations, and surreptitiously paying McArthur most flattering attention.

He was standing below, in a contemplative attitude, looking at the triumphal arch which spans the entrance to the grove of gods—flying white ribbons in the green, further pricked with red geranium.

Behold McArthur—important, brushed, soaped, fine beyond words! A high, white, starched collar—if you please. (In church he will wear or carry white kid gloves.) A clean pocket-handkerchief, brought forward in a prominent peak from the left-hand coat-pocket of the frock-coat which belongs to the top-hat.

The coat has seen infinitely less service of the two, it still looks regal, even if slightly funereal. It is very black, and so very long—most accurately buttoned across McArthur’s rather thin person. It hangs loosely.

I expect it fitted him better when he brought it back from Glasgow, against his own marriage.

McArthur considers himself, by the light of former days, not only as having been a personable lad but a lover of parts. No doubt Eliza found him sufficiently good. A few brief words in Scotland seem to pay better than reams of poetry elsewhere. It is a national trait to husband your strength.

I would say McArthur went about his courting warily. To hear him talking it over, he seemed only to have got at Eliza through her mother—an unsympathetic lady with forbidding manners.

It was soon after he had obtained his permission to court Eliza that he undertook a business journey to Glasgow,

and incidentally invested in his durable clothes. He paid money for them—straight down over the counter.

He wrote home a ponderous letter, not to Eliza but to Eliza's mother. The business included a deal in wool and flax on his future mother-in-law's behalf. She had trusted him. Even now, after half a century, McArthur feels flattered about it.

'She, Miss—she would na see you farther than your arm without her suspeecions raised. She trusted me a matter of conseederable miles, in a strange city full of evildoers.'

The letter home was extremely polite. It included a postscript for Eliza.

'Give Eliza,' he wrote, 'my proper respects and dear love, and tell her I am looking forward to our meerige.'

I hope Eliza was pleased. I would not have been in her place. A love postscript tagged on to your mother's business letter must rob it of much of its charm.

I tell you McArthur was born mean. He might have run to a separate piece of paper, an extra envelope, and another stamp.

Poor dear McArthur, I am not going to sit in judgment on him. I believe he has lost pounds of flesh during the last weeks in his effort to give 'satisfaction.' I know as a fact he has not had a well-deserved rest between a month of Sundays. He has been working, slaving, toiling at ornamental work, which at heart he despises. Not having the conscience to deprive the vegetables of their just due, he has worked overtime to satisfy both parties.

Across the decorative arch the 'satiny' ribbons are gleaming in the sunshine—not a speck or a flaw on the sanded path of the gods. The great courtyard presents an equally astonishing aspect. The Broad Walk does not know itself, it is so beautifully brushed and raked; not a leaf out of place.

No wonder the expression on McArthur's weather-beaten features leans towards sinful pride.

A fine show all round.

Flowering plants—out of the conservatory—mark the steps of the terraces. With systematic precision, in twos and twos the treasured pots descend.

Think if a wind knocked them over ?

Why imagine such evil luck ? Fanny was born under a lucky star. Her wedding morning has broken fair and fine. Just a haze over the river—just a heat haze, through which the wedding bells are threading their way with joyful insistence.

'The wedding day, the wedding day,' sang the bells, fluttering far and wide, entering into the holiday spirit of the hour.

Our weddings are always kept as high festivals. Every man jack on the estate, every complete family, every journeyman tinker keeps holiday.

All our friends, as far as space allows, crowd into the little church to assist at the actual marriage ceremony.

If you cannot do anything else you can give the bride your blessing, and watch her charming face with whole-hearted interest. A bride may be as plain as a pikestaff, but in the eyes of her friends she is always charming.

It is considered fortunate to be married in the presence of as many kind glances as you can muster.

Fanny will have the pick of the company. If she encounters a pair of unfriendly eyes you may be sure that they belong to a baby who knows no better.

The village babies are always specially invited, and stand in a solemn row, well up to the front, fixing the Pope with deep interest. In their eyes the Pope is the man to look at.

Our clergyman is a very nice man, but he is apt to get flustered.

At Olga's wedding—just as the ceremony was starting—he all but fainted. I do not know what kept him going—perhaps uncle Dimitri's commanding officer's weather eye. Uncle Dimitri in full gala uniform is an awe-inspiring gentleman.

'Don't you behave shabbily,' said uncle Dimitri's stern brown eyes. The Pope quailed under his ornate robes and continued the service in a quavering voice.

Immediately he had given the final benediction, his nervous energy forsook him, and he fell where he stood all of a heap.

Consternation !

The fact is he has never been the same man since his widowhood—some four years ago. Our clergy are only allowed to marry once, so it is a hard pull on them when they lose their wives.

Mascha came in very late to call me—considering I was up and dressed. Such a pretty dress, the first time on, white *crêpe de Chine*, finished by a ruche of old blond lace and a wreath of apple blossoms—artificial, of course. Another wreath to match in Jane's dark hair, which set off her sallow skin—for the nonce flushed a delightful pink. The pink flush heightened the sparkle of her tea-cup eyes. Altogether Jane felt as self-satisfied as a vainglorious peacock.

As a rule, she is not a vain body. However, on her own sister's wedding day she let herself go—whole-heartedly, frankly, entirely. As she carefully fitted each finger of her new kid gloves—to the elbow—she felt no fairy king could pay her a sufficiency of compliments. Anthony might. Would Anthony approve of her new dress ? Momentous question.

'It is all ready,' said Mascha, 'St. Nicholas be praised. As near as a needleful of cotton.'

'Grand!' I said, coaxing the left-hand thumb into its proper place and not knowing what she was talking about.

Dear old lady—in national dress—lovely embroidery and lace and beads—you never saw anything like Mascha's beads. She has outlived her ten sisters, she has inherited all their finery. Hence the prodigious display.

I wagged my thumb, and grew suddenly brilliant.

I knew that Fanny would be able to show herself in the grey voile over blue satin, minus the dust-cloak!

I kissed Mascha.

We went down together decorously, as befitted so great an occasion. We peeped into all the rooms.

The long table in the great dining-room was laid out with a fine show of plate and old china and cut crystal—with a yellow glint along the facets—piled-up napkins, some displaying intricate folding, fleurs-de-lis, pillars, swans, all company patterns and all folded by Boris, who graduated as pantry boy in the extravagant Count's household, and who now is reigning butler in our reduced establishment.

On occasions of state he has half a dozen footmen under him; in family life he is single-handed. The footmen are recruited from all ranks—gardeners, fishermen, and stable-boys. Every year—like the Militia—they undergo a month's training. Their general is sometimes dissatisfied—really and truly it is unfair to expect perfection under the circumstances. I know nothing about the Militia. I will swear that our 'boys' labour under excitement. You might say their hands were against them. On occasions of ceremony Boris and all his footmen wear white cotton gloves.

We have nice silver—grey-blue silver of a heavy and antique pattern. Vera considers it deplorably badly kept.

She wishes mother to send it to a silversmith in Peters-

burg and have it properly washed. She says it will come back looking as good as new.

Anna Nicolajevna only shakes her head over these new-fangled ideas. She is so splendidly old-fashioned. After each festivity she helps old Boris to drop each separate piece into its baize cover. The forks and the spoons and the knives live in partitioned flannel waistcoats—twelve to the family—they roll round each other, and get tied up together with a scarlet sarcenet ribbon.

I like to be accurate when I am about it.

I could give you such heaps of really interesting details from to-day, but I am afraid to test your patience.

However, you must hear about mother's dress—it will be quite fresh in your eyes—we know it very well.

The dress was originally made for Vera's wedding, five years ago ; since then, annually, it has undergone renovations. Cleo will never be able to disguise it—there is nothing to be done with a canary-coloured satin ornamented with broad moiré stripes except to wear it, or dye it, or throw it away.

Mother pooh-poohs the idea of dyeing as wanton extravagance. She says the canary-coloured satin must see her through all our weddings and best parties. Vera quite seriously mooted the question the other day of smuggling a party dress into mother's wardrobe, on the same principle as we work the estate. But what object would be gained by hanging on the peg another yellow satin dress—somewhat fresher, but identically the same ? Even mother would look askance at her party dress if it were brought out bright blue and very narrow.

To-day Anna Nicolajevna, standing under the crystal chandelier in the great saloon, receiving her guests, looked quite splendid.

A wreath of red heather in her hair done in wonderful

curls and coils, long white gloves—the canary silk is wearing elbow sleeves this year—and all her bracelets, little slim gold ones, great fat gold ones, and a gem set with diamonds, our father's gift to commemorate the birth of his eldest son.

There is a big square naked patch in the enchanted forest—the little brilliant bangle covers the greater part of it—one corner piece paid for a pressing account at the grocer's.

Already, by ten o'clock, Anna Nicolajevna's sweet face was flushed by the dual flush of joy and sorrow. The bright sunshine streaming in through the uncovered windows followed her as, presently, she moved about the crowded rooms—an admirable hostess, our mother.

She had a special word for tante Katja, in her wedding dress—violet silk with a tippet arrangement of lace and a brush of ostrich plumes in her hair—smooth and white as always. Tante Katja's feathers of ceremony are pale pink, and they are wonderfully becoming.

We complimented her warmly on her successful appearance.

I think, as far as our home circle went, we were pretty impartial. Even the twins' washed muslins with new sashes got their meed of praise. They wore white stockings and pink satin shoes—very fine indeed.

By twelve o'clock everyone had arrived—a deafening buzz of conversation. Boris and Boris's underlings threaded their way through living knots, with great trays laden with light refreshment, offered to prevent the guests fainting from want of nourishment on their way to church. Most of us had eaten a substantial breakfast at ten, so Anna Nicolajevna's solicitude was almost uncalled-for.

No one refused the sandwiches, and everyone took a glass of wine. . . . The conversation grew more deafening—the

guests who had dispersed through the long file of reception rooms pressed into the saloon. We formed up into line—five deep—waiting for the bride.

You could have heard a pin drop when Fanny entered the room on uncle Dimitri's arm. Very sweet she looked and rather uncomfortable. The white satin dress—we agreed later—became her vastly, and was a great credit to Cleo.

Not Solomon in all his glory could have looked half as imposing as uncle Dimitri. Imagine his height, his size, his orders, his epaulets, his jack-boots, his baggy trousers—his beaming, snobbish pride !

Uncle Dimitri loves us always, but his heart expands to the bride of the hour—expands as a giant flower in the sun. He does set off our brides ! Fanny was not in the least overshadowed. The fact is that beneath uncle Dimitri's apparently ungovernable conceit there dwells a humble spirit.

And the sunlight danced and quivered on the bride's happy face.

Suddenly uncle Dimitri clacked his heels together and bowed profoundly.

Across the room he met the eyes of uncle Hyppolyth. The Enemies saluted each other with equal precision.

The sunlight flashed on uncle Hyppolyth's solitary order, and on his rather shabby dress suit. He had honoured the house according to his ability.

The church procession formed up—strictly according to etiquette—and Fanny led the way down the Broad Walk, where the old apple trees, pricked by sunbeams, fluttered very gently not to disturb the bride's veil.

To the chiming of many bells the whole party was ferried across the river.

Coming back, we passed down the grove of statues,

under McArthur's triumphal arch spanned by 'satiny' ribbons, followed all the while by good angels scattering light and warmth.

After a substantial luncheon you ought to have seen Sascha going the round of the company, accepting every congratulation with smug satisfaction.

Some people have a way of smiling which rubs you the wrong way. I prefer Sascha bad-tempered—his smiles are oily, and every one on the surface. I am fearfully sorry, but I do not like Sascha. You may well say it is of minor importance as long as Fanny loves him. I quite agree with you. Fancy loving Sascha, wanting his companionship all the days of your life—pining for his kisses, dry as dust ! I will be bound they are leathery.

Sascha is a civil servant. He has the hands of a civil servant, the speech of a civil servant, the coat of a civil servant—the unutterable pride of a man pocketing his salary at the expense of a department.

I hope I am not vicious ?

I could not help looking at him—I was fascinated by his manner—bowing over the hands of the elder ladies and laughing mildly at their time-honoured jokes. More than a little patronising towards the neighbours. The all-the-year-round-country-gentleman-and-family appeals to Sascha's sense of humour and sets his heart tic-ticking to a pitying tune.

'How can people exist in the country ?' asks our brother-in-law, not in so many straightforward words but by the raising of an eyebrow, a turn of a foot, a deprecating gesture of a long, narrow, pliant hand—a very white hand with very pink nails, the hand of a civil servant.

I will forgive him his hands, but I utterly refuse to forgive him mesmerizing poor dear Fanny as she stood by his side on the special.

Only at the actual embarkation of the happy pair on the little steamer—hung with birch garlands and a necklace of flags—are tears allowed, nay, expected.

Anna Nicolajevna bears up bravely until the steamer pushes from shore. Then, I assure you, standing on the park bridge surrounded by her friends, she howls.

And as to the poor bride, at the actual moment of parting from us all she grows convulsive, trying to hide her feelings out of charity to the bridegroom.

Fanny told us beforehand that she was not going to cry ; she has promised Sascha to remain calm. Domineering young scoundrel—think of asking such a sacrifice !

We all fixed Fanny intently, as she stood on the deck of the festive steamer. She was as good as her word. There she stood—large as life—something white and blue in her hat, but not a tear in her blue eyes. How she will live to repent it !

As the little steamer noisily paddled out of sight, our mother buried her face in her handkerchief and leaned heavily on uncle Hyppolyth's arm. Uncle Hyppolyth stroked her disengaged hand.

No crocodile tears—you understand. Anna Nicolajevna felt acutely at the moment the parting of the invisible hedge of white roses. Away in the distance, on the bosom of the broad river, her baby was going out into a new life—outside the sheltering hedge of white roses and her mother's love.

' It is not the same thing, darling,' she says, when the bride of the hour assures her she will return soon—O, very soon !

Thank God for our April mother ! Five minutes later she had packed away her sorrow and was looking forward to the dance.

It was dark when we returned to the great house. Boris and his recruits had lighted up the Japanese lanterns. Our illuminations never vary—and strictly speaking they are not exceptionally good—but they are always received both with acclamation and surprise.

'How pretty!' said Anna Nicolajevna, looking up at the verandah, where the red balls glowed in a tracing of green.

The rooms were all lighted up. No fairy lights which vanish so quickly, but solid candles and oil lamps, good for a great many hours.

We danced in the big dining-room. A band from the local town, up in the musicians' gallery, performed an excellent programme.

Uncle Dimitri opened the ball with Anna Nicolajevna. Such a pair!

At the very height of the proceedings uncle Hyppolyth joined the band. With the agility of a boy he climbed the steep little staircase leading to the gallery. They gave him a front place, and he played as he had never played before—the gayest, brightest, quickest music of his life!

Enthusiasm knew no bounds. We encored the mazurka—young and old tripped it gaily up and down the polished floor.

The servants came in to look at us—they also cheered uncle Hyppolyth. The band followed his lead, straining every nerve to do their best.

Upstairs, in the loft, the disused furniture heard the sound of many feet and the gay music.

The little settee covered with tarnished silver and shrimp pink brocade tried to move her gilt feet—they were numb from want of moving; hidden behind the walnut table, our great-great-grandmother's favourite sofa has stood, in all her tattered pride, such an unconscionable age. Still she remembered the light and the glamour of her great days,

the gentle pressure of Countess Sylvia's peach-tinted cheek. . . .

Up in the dark loft, the crowded loft, the despised furniture whispered amongst themselves :

' Let them dance, let them sing, let them marry, let them die, we outlive them all—those human beings, who make us, and shift us, and break us. . . . We outlive them all ! . . . '

A clatter overhead.

No one heard it downstairs in the ballroom. And if they had they would not have cared.

It was only an old plate—a chipped old plate standing perilously close to the edge of the walnut table. In her excitement to hear what the French sofa was saying, she toppled over.

The old sofa shivered, looking at the broken plate lying at her tarnished feet. She had received a shock. Even they were not secure from accidents.

CHAPTER XIX

ALL SAINTS' EVE

I AM glad to tell you that Fanny's first letter home in some measure made up for her glacial behaviour in leaving us.

The letter was full of throbbing regret—such a sweet letter—tremulous and girlish and dainty. I could not have written it better myself !

She did not sound the trumpets of married bliss. She was not wildly looking forward to the Munich Galleries, where Sascha is taking her to spend her honeymoon ; no, her whole heart was crying out for the mother she had left behind her—home-sick on the second day of her married life ; a desperately weary little Fanny ! Fanny has a nice mind.

We all read her letter, we all appreciated her choice sentiments. Mother smiled through her tears.

'The dear child,' she said, with a catch in her voice.

We none of us envied Fanny the undisputed possession of her Departmental Secretary, nor her right of way through the Munich Galleries. Sascha would be sure to over-explain the pictures. As a guide and a philosopher he does not bear thinking upon. We are trying to accept him as a friend.

It is our duty towards Fanny, Fanny who was born under a lucky star—it must have been cloudy the night Sascha proposed.

We young ones pitied our sister from the very bottom of our hearts. We remembered all her good points and deliberately forgot her occasional scratches. In a big family you cannot always keep serene. I remember one morning, not so very long ago, when Fanny and I came to loggerheads over the breakfast-table. It ended by us both solemnly getting up—one armed with the teapot, the other with the milk jug—and pouring the contents over each other's head.

Anna Nicolajevna screamed. ‘ You little devils ! ’ she said. ‘ What are you doing ? ’

It was quite easy to see what we were doing.

I am just telling you of this shabby incident, in case you should imagine us priggishly good.

Poor dear Fanny—how we have wronged her !

I expect, as soon as the steamer was well under way she collapsed in the cabin, and cried so terribly that Sascha had to find her some eau de Cologne and a clean handkerchief.

Uncle Hyppolyth—who rises above personal triumph—clutched hold of Fanny’s blotted postscript. ‘ I am happy, most happy,’ said the postscript.

‘ She is happy ! What else matters ? ’ he asked, almost defiantly.

His dear old eyes stared straight ahead, across the invisible hedge of white roses, as if he saw Fanny, just outside, dancing in the sunlight and giving the time to her life-partner ; as if he heard her clear young voice singing, full of sentimental music.

Presently we all, figuratively speaking, crowded around uncle Hyppolyth’s chair, and took his point of view. Dear, dear, what a vista of happiness stretched before yester-week’s bride !

We are by ourselves again, the company have left.

Aunt Hélène was the last of the casuals to leave. She went this morning by the early boat.

She took a final kiss and a final stare at her niece Jane. She screwed her good-natured eyes so tightly that I feel convinced she reduced me, put me in a cabinet-frame, and saw me in a ‘fancy’ picture, throning it on her grand-piano.

Aunt Hélène took a great liking to Anthony. I am sorry to say he did not return the compliment.

He told me, privately, he never could stick women who habitually look at you through the corner of their eyes, and who smile at you out of the corner of their mouths. ‘Something creepy about that edition, Jane,’ he said, holding my hand so tightly that he nearly crippled it for life. I bore the pain admirably, as the more he squeezed my hand the more it seemed to soothe his ruffled feelings.

‘She means so well,’ I said.

‘I wonder,’ said Anthony—looking at me with his whimsical smile.

Now, is not his smile delightful—in every edition? How silly of me, you have never met Anthony! I pity you.

He is a very nice subject, but I think I will leave him in peace, rocking in his hammock out in the garden, or I might go on for ever with the subject.

Have I ever mentioned the touch of sentiment which clings to certain seats in the big saloon—our living-room? Here we sit, here we talk, here we dream away the blessed hours. It seems rather dreadful to know that as each hour slips past it can never return. Our tenancy of life is fearfully short. And we do not all of us live in the front rooms, facing due south; there comes a time when ill-health, or ill-luck, or some unforeseen event makes short shrift of our feelings. ‘There you are, miss—that’s your

room.' And we get pushed into some dark hole—a cold, damp, lonely den—and have just to suck our thumbs and bear it. No good howling over misfortune—is there ?

Keep your circle clear, your fire burning, the love light in your eyes intact. Reverence your home. Everyone has a fetish. Mine is the love of an old house. A house which has grown grey and mellow in your service, in the service of your people.

All over the wide, wide world such homes are scattered, all closely knit together. There is a bond between man which nations cannot sever—as one ivy leaf is like another, so the spirit of home-life remains insoluble. Neither wars nor rumours of wars can shatter the distinction of a united homestead ; the bond of unity steals over the wide world. In the backwoods, and in the heart of civilisation—one creed, one people, one love.

Our old house is looking very beautiful to-day. The September sun is gleaming on the tinted leaves of her most delicate creeper. In a tiny russet leaf autumn lies ensconced.

Winter will soon be here—soon over—and, glory to God ! spring will rush across the face of the earth, a herald of life eternal !

The old house smiles.

I think she rather loves the beauty of a simple faith, the pagan love of her daughter.

We all have our particular places in the old saloon.

Tante Katja, principally on account of her eyes, prefers to sit in the corner seat by the window. As the magnet draws the needle she has drawn us. The family instinctively group themselves around their oldest member.

Think of us, when the work of the day is done, gathered together, tante Katja still assiduously tatting—we others just lazing, or talking, or reading.

Uncle Dimitri's special chair is high-backed, straight, horribly uncomfortable ! He despises 'flopping on the floor,' as he calls it. Not so his Enemy—I suppose enemies do not agree—uncle Hyppolyth loves his rocking-chair, a low, luxuriously upholstered rocking-chair. His chair faces Anna Nicolajevna's chosen seat, an immense affair this, solid and large, covered in green morocco—a special extravagance of the extravagant Count—thank you, dear grandpapa ! The chair really is a delight, when I creep into it I am practically lost—where has little Jane got to ? you might well ask. Anna Nicolajevna fills it better.

We young people, according to age, range ourselves round our elders. Vera has the eldest born's privilege of being the first to select her chair. She tried them all when she was young—a thing in plaits and black legs—as a reasonable woman she has stuck by a Sheraton seat ; a convenient little chair which can be walked about. As a married woman, Vera is a rare treat. Sometimes she will sit by mother, generally that little chair is tucked up close to uncle Hyppolyth. Uncle Hyppolyth is very flattered by the compliment.

I am afraid Anna Nicolajevna has not brought us up particularly well.

We none of us have the moral courage to imitate tante Katja's wonderful deportment. For hours she will sit bolt upright, without a single flexible hinge in her old back. We girls are given to lolling, and when the boys—dreadful little apes where the nuts please them—imitate our unlady-like example, tante Katja looks mildly disapproving.

If the boys happen to catch her weather eye they unscrew themselves with alacrity—straightening their spines to straining point, deeming an attitude of no importance in comparison to tante Katja's pleasure.

The boys are good-hearted, besides they have an old

fashioned notion in showing a lady attention—chivalrous all of them.

They have had their masters, and their model gentleman in uncle Dimitri. The boys consider him perfect, even when he lashes out in mock rage. Such a convincing artist is uncle Dimitri that his temper appears at times acutely real. There is no mistaking his battle-words—quite impossible for tante Katja's ears. In her presence he is obliged to swallow them. You always know when uncle Dimitri has himself well in hand—he is far more fidgety when he is off at so many rattling words a minute.

Yet, with all our faults, there is a touch of niceness about us which leavens the whole.

On your pet swear word, would you not like to find yourself, one evening, transplanted in our midst, seated on one of the company seats—open to all—listening to uncle Hyppolyth's best story, or only watching Anna Nicolajevna's expressive face, radiant in the presence of her dear ones ?

There are some ladies who keep their best face for company and wear their worst face at home. ‘Any rag will do to-night, Fanchette—we are dining by ourselves.’—‘Yes, miladi. . . .’ So miladi dresses to match her face—and milord looks as grumpy as grumpy can be—they yawn themselves to bed.

That illustration does not apply to Russja-Kaja—it never does where the white roses bloom. The white roses of love and sympathy and kindness make all the difference to dress and manners !

Whoever you are, please take a seat. I am not going to apologise for my family—but so much I will tell you—we are never sensational, and sometimes we are dull. Are you still anxious to know us ? Is there anything so truly terrible as being bored ?

If you have a decent soul in your body and a mind above sensation you will find us true and very well worth while—the solid worth of an honest friend.

There is a touch of sentiment peculiar to Russja-Kaja, and to every home abroad.

Our dead never lose count.

They have gone before—vanished for a time—but their spirit is ever with us.

They, the dear dead, who but yesterday were alive—to the old house, and the young heart, a decade is as a shorn minute—their memory is of clinging virtue, sweet and unalloyed.

In life's wonderful garland—the bright buds of May, summer's red-hearted roses, autumn's starry petals, winter's hips and haws—in and between the immortelles find their proper setting. Betwixt and between life's growing flowers we bind the living memory of our dead.

Lest we forget. Look around the great saloon, furnished for the most part by Countess Sylvia's identical French suite, her gilt furniture—‘covered, dear mother, in shrimp pink brocade with knots of silver tinsel’—Sylvia's voice breathes from her old letters—alas, Sylvia's favourite seat is, I believe, standing ragged and torn upstairs in the dreaded lumber-loft. Every generation unto itself. The miserable shortness of our minds! . . . The old house looks on and wonders.

‘Countess Sylvia always sat on that particular sofa,’ she says; ‘it stood over there, by the window. I remember her, drawing your great-great-grandfather beside her, the night the Empress paid her unexpected visit. How she twittered him! How she cuddled up against his flowered waistcoat—a bit of a dandy, your great-great-grandfather—she let him play with her yellow flax curls. . . .’

The old house smiles.

For see you, across those empty chairs standing serenely side by side—lest we forget—we have stretched a fine silk cord.

No one must use those chairs.

Sentiment, pure sentiment.

In the midst of an animated conversation, Anna Nicolajevna's beautiful brown eyes will instinctively turn towards the old Bergère, standing against the wall. A museum piece? A broken chair? No.

Our father's favourite seat.

Fate, ugly fate, rattled at life's foundations eleven years ago. It was a near thing that Anna Nicolajevna lost her faith in the Perfection of Wisdom.

God must have helped her across the troubled waters. Since then she has sailed into a sheltered harbour. True, her one good ship and strong has gone to sea, but all her little craft are with her. I rather fancy, at times, her grandchildren group themselves around the old Bergère and effectually hide its emptiness. Do not call it forgetfulness, but mercy which passes understanding.

'I breathed upon the flow'r of friendship,
And it blew into the rose of love.'

These lines were written by our father and attached to a sheaf of roses he sent Anna Nicolajevna on their engagement day.

In her heart she waters her roses every day.

The written message she has given to the old chair, she gave it the day our father permanently left his home. He was so seldom away, and never for many days at a stretch—he loved Russja-Kaja.

The world has always a niche for a clever man. Our father was not ambitious in the ordinary acceptance of the term. He was more than contented with his brief command at home.

My parents had known each other all their lives, and they wiped out their first quarrel in the nursery, by a kiss—I wonder if that historic quarrel was the first and the last ? We never saw our father and mother quarrelling. Together they shared the victory of faith and love ; love is watchful, faith is kind—unto the greater, the laurel wreath.

Their married record was very clean. They kept the home bright. Who knows, if death found them unprepared ? In her sheltered kingdom, Anna Nicolajevna has always been a great queen.

Tragedy did not blight her greatness, tragedy did not rob her of her sorrow, or of her gladness—the two can be united. Tragedy gave to her the victory, to him the peace of a just reward.

We can only remember our father as young and happy and handsome—a requiem mass to suit the best of us !

I tell you there are moments, at no great intervals, when Anna Nicolajevna's beautiful brown eyes will rest on the old Bergère with loving intent . . . in the midst of an animated conversation, she will remember—nay, she will see—see her dear friend sitting in his old place, enjoying the evening amazingly. She will watch his merry eyes, his brilliant, sparkling eyes—the energy of him ! the stature of him ! the healing optimism of his faith !

'Your father never had time to be clever, he was always so busy.'

A typical speech of mother's—very clear-cut edges.

If ever anyone dares to say her husband wasted his opportunities, 'with his gifts'—she stands up for his just fame.

'A good father, a good husband, a good landlord, and a Christian gentleman—what more can you want ! Is there not honey in the plant ?'

I tell you, Anna Nicolajevna will cheerfully whip you

with a thong of scorpions if you dare to dim the record of her hero.

The wheels of life revolve quickly ; death is ever reaping a harvest of wheat or tares. At times we do forget !

Serenely, against the wall, the old chairs stand, well content.

‘ We are wreathed with fair rosemary,’ they whisper, when the shadows fall and the night winds blow.

In the dark room, the company seats creak uneasily. They are jealous of the chosen few—they are even jealous of the married sisters’ chairs.

When Vera heads the flight of the sister-birds they are full of rejoicing.

‘ Not to-night, nor yesterday, nor the day before. Three whole days they have never been near you . . . most certainly they have gone, and you will be pushed out of the circle—superfluous, silly old chairs ! Your pride of place sickens us ! You senseless vanity bags ! What about your springs and your general appearance ? You are shabby, downright shabby, and some of you are not even antique. . . . ’

The gilt French furniture covered with shrimp pink brocade and tarnished silver knots grows valuable under their fancied slight.

The spirit of the old room sighs at their exhibition of rivalry.

‘ Chairs or women,’ she says, ‘ they are all alike.’

Silence descends for a space.

Not for long.

Up speaks an elegant chair, airing her grievance.

‘ The conceit of some pieces,’ she murmurs.

‘ I did not catch your remark,’ says the nodding mandarin on the satinwood chest.

The envious chair repeats it.

'Very funny,' says the mandarin, nodding his head as if he were bent on dislocating his neck.

The envious chair faces the family group. A tiny ray of light circles the extravagant Count's favourite seat.

'At least my springs are not broken,' she remarks grandly.

The great morocco chair stands immovable. He is an English-built chair, and he never gets excited over his Gallic neighbour's disparaging remarks ; they do not affect him in the least, he knows his own solid worth and the prime value of his hide.

The little mandarin nods his head more violently than ever.

'Indeed !' he says, 'excuse me, madame, I never knew you had a spring.'

Someone chuckles.

The pretty little gilt chair creaks in every one of her worn seams. A home-thrust which touches truth hurts as a knife.

The satinwood chest smiles all over her polished surface.

'Rather amusing,' she says, 'this perpetual squabbling amongst the upholstered seats ! Man—a mercy ! they gave me a more durable coat—a flick of the duster, there I am, as bright as ever !'

The satinwood chest always ignores her ormolu mounts, which are not so bright as they were.

We never look upon the married sisters' chairs as vacated—they are always drawn up, waiting in the family circle for their rightful owners.

We never know what chance may bring us. The sisters are rather fond of 'surprising' us between their official visits. At any moment—say a dull autumn evening—

Vera, Marussa, Olga, and now poor dear Fanny, may quietly enter the great saloon, kiss us all round, and drop into their places.

Their chairs—through the watching hours—stand waiting with widely stretched arms, and, when a spring creaks or a piece of silk stretches, it is as if the chairs themselves were speaking and calling for their occupants.

Once a year the old house holds her party. On All Saints' Eve she welcomes a gathering of old-time friends. The old house never forgets. She remembers her masters from ever so long ago—they have vanished, disappeared into the world she knows nothing of. A great gulf separates the dead from the living. Once a year she asks her people to assemble under the roof they loved.

They all honour her invitation.

In the gloaming they pass within. Such a strange company ! The old house never asks the living to meet the company of the dead.

The old house smiles at her dear friends.

She would like to question them.

The voiceless spirits would not answer her.

In silence they flit through the beloved rooms. Perhaps they notice improvements—perhaps they notice each other ? Perhaps spirit answers spirit ? In the old house they are all of the same family. Some were born before—some later—they are all of the same blood.

The old house smiles.

CHAPTER XX

THE FLIGHT OF THE HUMMING-BIRDS

IT is a brilliant morning—a flood of light in the sky, and a perspective cut as clear as crystal. The great sweep of forest, dark and quiet, meets the empty fields.

Black earth and garnered harvest—a good harvest this year—a good year all round—and an honest year.

There is a tremendous satisfaction in integrity. Falsehood is such a slippery jacket—any day it can slide off your shoulders, and there you are—exposed !

Autumn has her drawbacks.

She fills my river with stinging needles, and hardens the heart of my mother.

‘Jane, it is too cold. . . .’

So Jane is limited to her cold tub.

The very sight of it sends Mascha awry, shivering. Nearly every morning she returns to the charge :

‘Jane Sergejevna, just a spice of hot water ? It will be the death of you.’

‘Leave it as it is. I will warm it up presently myself.’

That finishes Mascha. She runs. The idea is too horrible.

We are getting horribly short-handed.

Yesterday Olga and Guns started for the Crimea, and last week Vera and all her babies left for Petersburg. The big boys have returned to their respective duties—a hush has fallen over Russja-Kaja.

We cling to Marussa and to Anthony. We tell Anthony of the enchanting prospects of a Russian winter. I do not know what keeps Marussa from the path of duty. She says it is her duty to go—and she stays on. Perhaps it is out of respect to the dinner-table ; another leaf gone and it would look miserly—such a reduced party.

The twins and Jacques have started lessons again, and launched the new term on a wave of noble resolves. However, it does not prevent them getting into mischief, and lacerating the feelings of the English governess, who takes her governessing seriously.

I do not believe Anthony will be induced to stay a moment longer at Russja-Kaja than necessary. Uncle Dimitri or uncle Hyppolyth has worked him round to the absolute necessity of a Russian tour. He is to start with Moscow—next week—in a paltry seven or eight days Anthony will have left us.

The ingratitude of some people !

‘ Jane, don’t get into the habit of telling lies ! ’

Mercy ! I did get a start. I quite fancied I heard cousin Anthony’s voice. And I know as a fact he has been up since three in the morning, shooting foxes under uncle Dimitri’s able guidance. Anthony tells us in East Kent every decent fellow would shoot you if he caught you peppering a fox ; he is kept for equestrian sport in England. They run a fox to death’s door in England—if they are lucky—the hounds finish him off ; then they, the equestrians, shake hands all round and say they have had a grand day.

I know I am wronging cousin Anthony. He does not want to leave us ; more than that, I can give a very good guess as to his reasons. It is rather loathsome to shake up your tent when you have just hit upon an oasis of great beauty and promise. I think Anthony would be well

pleased to rest indefinitely under the palm trees and suck the lotus flowers of idleness.

All this pretty rhetoric is Anthony's. He likes, now and again, to talk in veiled language ; sometimes he says I am too quick at translating. I can enter into his feelings. Who does not know the delight of letting things glide when life is smiling very pleasantly ? . . . Poor Anthony . . . what a little double-dyed fool I am ! Such a waste of mock sympathy. Anthony is not to be pitied. Did we not agree last night that, taking one thing with the other, we were the two happiest people alive ? A great discovery !

I have been feasting on the thought all this morning—this sun-kissed morning of early autumn.

Vera had a lovely day for her journey.

We who spend our lives at Russja-Kaja are rather apt to fancy the world beyond a howling wilderness. Anyhow, the sisters always depart as sorry as humming-birds in a cage.

Not so the babies.

I believe uncle Dimitri boldly wiped away a tear the day the oldest baby, in a smart white travelling pelisse with a fat pink bow under her fat chin, was placed in the travelling carriage ; and she—she treated him vilely, being entirely centred in the departure, and anxious for a start.

'Wave your hand ; kiss your hand,' ordered Vera in an audible whisper to her eldest born.

The oldest baby obeyed her much as a mechanical doll. She waved her hand perfunctorily to us all with utter indifference. I saw Vera give her a poke in the back.

'Are you not sorry, darling ? Look—poor grandmamma all alone, and the poor giant, Diney's own giant——'

Neither the poke nor the wheedling voice of parental authority had the least effect on the Wax Doll. Give her due credit, a pink-cheeked, blue-eyed, curly-haired Wax

Doll, worth quite a five-pound note, counting her clothes—‘every article to come on and off.’

The Wax Doll stared solemnly in front of her. Were not the beautiful gee-gees—a tandem flanked by two pairs, which makes six—on the point of starting? One—two—three—off! The Wax Doll set up an ecstatic yell of pleasure, a triumph of mechanism.

In a whirl of dust the great carriage rolled down the avenue. Vera’s blue veil floated in the wind. The bright sun caught the rubicund face of the gorgeous wet-nurse—sitting with her back to the horses, holding the new baby in her arms. The middle baby, a placid child, was squeezed in between Vera’s maid and a bundle of wraps.

The diplomatic father of the family had contrived his departure quite a week in advance. Vera took his desertion in the light of a blessing. A man is always more or less out of place in an atmosphere of nursery luggage; even diplomacy cannot very successfully swallow luggage which includes three perambulators, it makes a man look ridiculous. A man has a wholesome terror of cutting a figure of fun, he prefers to cut and run, which is, by the way, a poor pun.

There was a time when Anna Nicolajevna drove twelve ‘mettled’ horses to her travelling carriage and cut a dash in the government. One could spy her thundering carriage miles off along the straight high road—an imposing turn-out if you will.

Anthony says it must have smacked of a circus, and that the sight of such conveyance down in East Kent would, no doubt, set the motor-cars bolting down the hills.

Poor mother—she has come down in the world. We have always dreaded that she may be reduced to a pair. A pair of horses in the travelling carriage would look just as much out of place as a pair of Shetland ponies harnessed to a

four-in-hand and trotting valiantly round the ring at Olympia.

Through her squat chimney, the bakehouse is puffing into the blue ether pillars of smoke ; and a nice smell of rye bread a-baking steals through the frosty air.

O the loaves which Tatjana—our most unfairy-like cook—is kneading and pounding and rolling with her sinewy arms, against the long winter.

Black bread is baked only twice a year at Russja-Kaja ; black bread means more than a day's hard work for the kitchen staff. I doubt if rye bread is not more exacting than potatoes. Potatoes run to three days' hard labour —three days' hard digging for fifty women and children and a sprinkle of menfolk. Potato-digging is considered beneath men and beyond extreme youth. The children on the potato field are all leggy and strong—digging away with a view to a substantial meat dinner at the expense of Anna Nicolajevna.

Extra labour feeds well at Russja-Kaja. When the occasion demands it, our mother sends her scrawled notes flying in all directions, and the immense coppers are set a-boiling filled with an excellent stew.

Given a fine day, the gathering of the potatoes is a yearly holiday for our poorer cottagers ; rain is apt to clog the earth—and the heavier spirits. McArthur is a down-right spoilt character when the rain drips on the bent backs of his hirelings, sombrely dressed to meet the exigencies of the case. Given sunshine, and the women don their gayest bodices and brightest skirts ; the rain beats on colourless jackets, to match the gloom around—grey, green-black, formless garments—and boots heavily clogged with clay, and hands caked with dirt. I expect the hands of potato-digging humanity beggar description, even if

they are supplied with requisite tools; hands and only hands, at a critical moment, garner the fruits of the earth; speed, after all, is more paying than a nicety of cleanliness, and perhaps grubbing in the moist earth has its charms.

I have often baked a cake of rye bread with middling success. I have never tried potato-digging.

I begged McArthur one day to let me fill one tiny sack. He snorted. He said one must stop somewhere. According to him, I had reached the limit. I was barred potatoes. As to onions, I have never offered to help him in gathering these pearls of great price. He would never let me, anyhow!

We are allowed to pick fruit for bottling and jam-making. Even then McArthur has a way of measuring our red-stained fingers with polite contempt. Gathering fruit is not the beesiness of the young leddies—if it amuses them, varry well and good. There is no accounting for taste. Out of the tail-end of his eye McArthur casts disdain, and if you held a raspberry between your finger and thumb, as a dainty robin might hold it in his beak, McArthur would swear that you were squashing the fruit—‘A nasty mess, to be sure.’

It is rather working under difficulties.

Shelling peas on the great verandah is a legitimate task; also preparing mushrooms, which calls for old gloves and patience. A clothes-basket of mushrooms will, eventually fill but three bowls of fresh clear water—they do run to waste, our friends the mushrooms, before they pack into air-tight jars, waiting to be tossed in cream or served in an omelette.

Snipping young carrots and prime beans, bottling gooseberries and peas—quite all right. McArthur serves them out according to a good or bad season; a bad

green-pea season or a shortage of beans means a deficit somewhere in the storeroom.

Anna Nicolajevna is in despair—she does love a goodly array of ticketed bottles and jars in the roomy cellar, each row weighted by planks and stones, a safeguard against rat gourmets and a plague of mildew. McArthur, above, all loves a rattling good budget. ‘Get your income first,’ he says, ‘then pay for your luxuries.’ McArthur is wise, and, more than that, he is outspoken and listened to.

CHAPTER XXI

A LOVE LETTER

IT is an important occasion when our old postman formally delivers up the postbag—such an ancient, massive, leather bag, very weighty in itself, and very often containing the thinnest of posts.

Anna Nicolajevna keeps the duplicate key herself.

It is she who dives into the old bag's roomy divisions and who sorts the post. It is rather like diving into a lucky-tub, and we all watch her hands with interest. Will there be any letters to-day, and who will be the fortunate recipient ?

Watch Anna Nicolajevna's expressive face as she flashes a glance round the circle. Sometimes she plays with us—much as a cat plays with a mouse—just for the fun of the thing. . . . ‘Something for you to-day, Dimitri, or tante Katja—guess ! ’

Tante Katja always trembles when she gets an odd letter. Her correspondents have, in the course of time, and at different lamentable periods, gone on the long journey for which no return tickets are issued—to the shadowy land peopled by the shadowy angels. How very little we do know about the angels ! And, as you remember, the sea took tante Katja's faithful lover—he left for the shadowy kingdom on the crest of a mad, wild wave.

Poor tante Katja. The calamity of that wrecked ship !

Yesterday—such a punctually yesterday as far as our fluctuating posts are concerned—I glued my eyes on the

old bag, and watched with a fascinated expression my mother turn the key in the rusty lock—and—dive for herself. She was expecting news from Vera, who is in Paris and amusing herself.

I recognised my letter immediately. My heart gave a wicked jump and all the blood in my body surged into my face.

I tried to feign an impossible lack of interest. The very sight of an envelope is encouraging, even a circular is better than nothing.

Believe me, there are heaps and heaps of occasions when the wicked black bag yields nothing but a two-days-old paper, and when it goes hard on the chocolate box.

The uncles bent their inquisitive old heads over Anna Nicolajevna's broad shoulders. No one looked at me. Mercy ! I felt my blush was going down ; give a blush time and it is bound to dribble into your toes. I never mind if each separate toe tingles and heats and glows as long as my tell-tale cheeks remain cool.

'A letter for Jane !' cried my mother.

She studied the envelope.

Uncle Hyppolyth remarked it was poor writing, and that the Russian characters were crudely contrived.

'It is from Anthony,' said Anna Nicolajevna. 'The Moscow postmark. Whatever can he be writing to Jane for ? I hope he is enjoying himself.'

'I hope so,' I said in a very small voice.

Uncle Dimitri, without turning round or looking at me, stretched an enormous arm behind his back and handed me my letter.

'There you are, Jane.'

'Two letters from Vera—the darling child. One is for you, Hyppolyth.'

Anna Nicolajevna shut the postbag with a snap.

Then she went across the room and opened the upper drawer in the satinwood chest and produced a bag of chocolates.

It is an honoured rule in the establishment whoever receives no letter gets a consolation choc-choc. Uncle Dimitri dislikes chocolates, but he would eat the whole of Menier's stock-in-trade rather than hurt Anna Nicolajevna's rather susceptible feelings.

'I thank you very much,' he said gallantly, popping a chocolate-cream into his mouth, surreptitiously hiding his lighted cigarette.

Anna Nicolajevna noticed nothing—she never does notice anything when the sisters write. Duty done, she was at liberty to devour her precious letter.

She went straight to her own chair and handed her letter to uncle Dimitri.

He carefully cut open the envelope with a silver stiletto hanging to his watch-chain—it is the only weapon he carries on his person. His redoubtable sword hangs over his bed, crossed by another of greater intrinsic value and much less fame. The valuable sword had a gold hilt encrusted with diamonds. 'Puff!' says uncle Dimitri, 'a fancy toy!'

Oh, his toy shop! He has no less than six swords of honour, and snuff-boxes innumerable, and gorgeous Tartar saddles, and lengths of silk stuffs and gold and silver tissues—all trophies of war—I expect bribes from the conquered races, quite worth appeasing uncle Dimitri. . . .

Watch Anna Nicolajevna's expressive face as she reads her letter to herself—presently it will be read aloud for the benefit of the company. I assure you one can make a very good guess at its contents by looking at her face. . . . Something very amusing . . . very amusing. And now for a calamity! Anna Nicolajevna's white forehead is

puckered in a hundred frowns—she fidgets, she sighs, she shakes her head, she ejaculates, she puts the uncles in a fever of impatience. (I do not count to-day. My own letter is so very much more interesting.) She generally ends up on a smile. Vera's calamities have a way of turning out providentially well.

I slipped Anthony's unread letter into my pocket. I did not feel like reading it aloud to the family circle—I had a sound conviction it would not read well, especially to an uninitiated audience.

Anthony is not to be trusted.

I begged him before he left to write a family letter, a letter of sightseeing and fairly pretty speeches. We all appreciate nice expressions—it need not be a stiff, formal letter, by any means.

And all that Anthony replied to my good advice was short and to the point.

'Bosh,' said he. 'I will write to the family, and you are so good as to keep the letters I send you for yourself—understand ?'

Anthony is fearfully decided.

He looked down at me, and he held both my hands tightly in his.

'Little Jane,' he whispered ; 'darling little Jane.'

It was his last evening at Russja-Kaja, and we were both sentimental :

'You will promise me——'

The number of promises he extracted in one short half-hour was well above the average.

'I promise,' I said, feeling—well, handsomely mean.

Not even that last evening would the family notice anything particular, except, perhaps, uncle Dimitri. Having played such a big part in the world, he can keep his eyes open and yet remain blind. It is called strategy.

He did manœuvre that half-hour's *tête-à-tête*. He proposed the moonlit walk, down the Broad Walk, and directly he got us safely under way he melted.

A man does not act in such a manner by pure chance.

Dear uncle Hyppolyth might do so ; then he is really wondrous blind, and has not got one instinct to work on ; he will never see anything until you tell him to look, and he never will look if you would rather not.

However in the world he was forced into that quarrel passes understanding. They must have beat it into him by some very poisonous method. “ Hyppolyth, ha ! Hyppolyth, hein !—he is insulting you, a bloody insult—Hyppolyth, ha ! ”

Then I expect the dear man understood, and rose to the hateful occasion—.

Oh, how that letter—Anthony’s first letter—burned in my pocket.

Instead of doing the wise thing and slipping from the room and satisfying myself as to its contents, out of sheer bravado and deliberate intention to mortify my spirit I set about a game of patience, a double patience, a beastly patience which drags and drags and drags.

Half-way through the awful game, uncle Dimitri stalked up to my table and swished my cards all of a heap.

‘ Go upstairs,’ he said.

‘ Thank you, dear uncle,’ I replied. And I stood up on tip-toe and tried to give him a kiss on his left cheek. However, I reached no further than his chest, so I just laid my head against it and said nothing.

‘ You babies—you babies,’ sighed uncle Dimitri.

I ran.

I ran up the shallow staircase, colliding with Mascha in the upper corridor, who was laden with stiffly-starched plain petticoats still warm from the ironing-room.

Of course, she ejaculated, ‘ St. Nicholas protect us ! ’

Whatever she would have done if that glorious Saint had never lived I cannot imagine.

‘ Saint Nicholas is great ! ’ I replied. And in the exuberance of my spirits I twisted old Mascha right about, sending the starched petticoats galloping around.

Mascha’s dim eyes lit with pleasure ; she rather loves an impertinence.

I do not know if I ought to set it down here—if I am infringing my promise to Anthony—but it is such a beautiful letter, I do not suppose he would really mind. You do not belong to the Family.

I crept up on my little sofa by the window the better to enjoy my letter—my first love letter.

I held it out of the window for an instant, just to show it to the garden, to the dark, naked flower-beds, and to the trees—the gorgeous remains of a feast of colour. The poor limes and beeches are very threadbare by now, they have been obliged to discard their lovely yellow and crimson autumn foliage ; soon they will be standing well up against the frosty sky, patiently waiting for the snow—the first snows of winter.

It is the end of October.

I do not suppose love has any season except the season of spring.

I know I have never missed the narcissus and jonquils and forget-me-nots during the whole of this rather bleak October. I have seen them blooming in McArthur’s carefully tidied beds.

He loves tidying up against the winter ; he takes a savage delight in rooting up the sweet-peas and the tobacco plants ; he does not spare the asters or anything which is ‘ bound to come up.’ Everything is bound to come up or to be cut down ; even the rose trees hide themselves under wooden

shelters, or, if they are of meaner quality, McArthur bends them to the earth, and buries them face deep in decayed leaves and furze branches.

‘The frost will na’ get at ‘em—if my name be James McArthur,’ he says.

McArthur is for ever fighting the frost—his enemy.

The light was fading in the west. A moment ago the sun showed up faintly red against the horizon.

How short the days are getting !

How good that life is so tremendously long !

Anthony says it is only the point of view of a very young girl—time shortens between every milestone.

Life and youth and love—what a golden-hearted apple it is !

If for no other reason I must write down Anthony’s letter—in case I should forget it. What an excuse, ‘poor enough to rattle in a dead pauper’s coffin, or to pave the road to hell’—one of Mascha’s awful sayings when she does not believe you.

You do believe me ? I am sincere, I assure you. I may be stupid, but I know I am sincere. . . .

Perhaps I am not a judge—perhaps Anthony’s letter is not stupendous—perhaps Josephine got better love letters from Napoleon—never mind, she did not appreciate them ; and I am going to love all Anthony’s letters just because he has written them—understand ?

‘Jane’—he wrote. (Dear, dear, I wonder if all Englishmen have such undecipherable handwriting ? I could not read my letter straight off—I just jumped to its dear meaning and got the words right after several guesses.)

‘—When may I come back again ? I don’t like Moscow, I don’t like the sights ; too many churches by far ; the Kremlin is a gloomy place and the Slavinsky Bazaar ruinous.

‘ I love you, cousin mine ! I want you and only you ; I am always thinking of you, seeing you, and remembering your dear little ways. Clever little lady, and my bright particular star. Jane, you have glorious eyes—I expect they are smiling now—showing flashes of tawny yellow under their brown velvet surface. Altogether you are a delightful combination—very irregular, Jane. Look at your blue-black hair, and those wonderful speaking brown eyes set squarely in a peach face. Where do you get your skin from ? Of course, an inheritance from your great-great-grandmother Sylvia—another reason why I fell in love with you—I have always been partial to my own people.

‘ You have got one great fault. Did not know such extremely young people lived, and talked—handsome nonsense. You are three parts fairy, Jane, and your mind is just ripe for adventure.

‘ My darling, I feel so worthless, thinking of you—and so old remembering the years of my fairy. I am thirty, and I “ look my age ”—as folks say when they are cruel. I have lived my life. No, that is a bouncing lie. I have squandered a great many years, knocking about here and there, but I never actually started living before I knocked at the door of Russja-Kaja and was given a large-hearted welcome.

‘ What is the secret of the place ? I expect it is the home of kind hearts and nice deeds. You are a wonderful family. Jane, my Jane—I am hungry for you. You do love me ?

‘ Be a good girl and contrive a wire. Get that old postman to send it off—just one word—“ Yes.” But it must be large. “ YES.”

‘ I took a walk in the old barbaric city last night ; not to see the sights, but the better to dream of Jane. A starlit night, and Jane’s moon topping the river—Jane’s river.

‘ In fact, dear Jane, you possessed that entire city of a

thousand churches. Are there a thousand ? No matter, if not we will set up a few little extra temples for our own benefit—just where I can turn in and thank Jane's God for His goodness to me.

‘ There is a spice of roses about your religion—you dear, confident, trusting person.

‘ England is a far cry from Russja-Kaja. Many a dipping hill and many a weary mile between your home and the old manor-house in Kent, where your great-great-grandmother queened it as a girl.

‘ I expect she is pleased—from somewhere over there—at one of her descendants going back to the old place, it is quite as it should be.

‘ The dear old house will welcome you with open arms. And you shall sit down in Countess Sylvia's own place in the long, low drawing-room—all chintz and roses, and old china, and heavy beams and carved panelling, and a great fire-place—an open fire-place, where in winter we will keep up rollicking fires, great logs, Jane, and watch great flames leaping up the chimney. We will sit together in the ingle nook and talk over old days and days to come. Why, my dear, we will have a blessed time in the house of fourteen gables ! Such weather-beaten ancient gables, all covered with ivy and fine carvings.

‘ You will love the low-pitched, wainscoted rooms. I will show you all over the place—from cellar to attic, Jane, my Jane, Queen of the May, my dear, Queen of my heart always.

‘ There, that is the nearest approach to poetry I can do !

‘ I could go on for ever telling you things, blessing you, loving you, admiring you, but I expect I had better leave off. Anyhow, you have a straight clue to work on.

‘ I am simply aching for my letter, my precious letter—the first letter which is going to form the basis of a whole

life's correspondence. Jane, mind you live long, and that you keep me going. I will even let you stay at Russja-Kaja without me, on the strength of those letters to be.

'I know they will be nice and fanciful, and Jane, through every word I will see you. And I dare say I will get awfully cross at times, thinking the letters not good enough. "Jane," I will call, "come right away at once, you belong to me, and I want you!"'

'Then, like a dutiful little wife, you will cut and run.

'Honour bright, I am not a selfish brute. We will never divide our homes—your people shall be my people and my people your people—that is fair and square, is it not ?

'When are we to tell the great news all round ? I have a little mother in England, and it seems unfair to Anna Nicolajevna to keep her in the dark any longer. But surely they know—never was there such a moonstruck devoted lover as Anthony Crayford—they must have guessed.

'I will stick it out for another week, and then I refuse to be shunted one day longer. I am not going to Petersburg—a shoddy place Petersburg, and not worthy a lover's attention.

'Tell you what, Jane, we will spend part of our honeymoon in Venice, working our way down to Rome. You have never seen Italy, and you will love it. Do you fancy motoring ?

'Good night, my own dearest girl, I adore you.

'ANTHONY.'

Is it not just Anthony to a dash ?

Such a beautiful letter.

I am quite the luckiest girl in all the world.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORM

THE wind rose in the night to a shriek.

One could hear it, miles off, tramping the leaden skies and fleecing the poor trees. Even the massive firs groaned and creaked under the grip of the storm, and the river dashed past with a sullen roar, and the tiny amber flames in the cottage windows seemed to flicker.

Except the very poor, who have to economise in lamp-oil, we are all rather late in going to bed at Russja-Kaja.

As to McArthur, sitting up at night is his one extravagance. Sometimes at two in the morning his lamp is still burning, a dim speck of light seen through the clouded window-pane. McArthur ‘holds’ with warmth, and his cottage is kept powerfully hot.

He never gives an account of his free hours.

I rather fancy he falls a-dreaming over Burns and Eliza, and steps out in the ‘speerit’—oh, miles away, where the heather blooms in plenty and where the burns like silver threads descend. . . .

Just as comforting as orthodox sleep, prosy, dreamless sleep—a crisp walk on the moors, in the morning of life, tripping it gaily beside the bonnie girl you want, in the best of spirits and fine good temper. . . .

It must be a slap-dash to ring down the curtain on a scene of such glorious certainty. In fact, McArthur does

it unwillingly. Often in the morning—meeting him on duty—his eyes have such a distant haze about them.

‘Good morning, Miss Jane,’ he says—but he does not see Miss Jane. He is looking at a bit of a humble cottage, feathered in Scotch mist—the sun breaking through a corner—listening for the sound of one voice.

Happy is he who only hears one voice. Unfortunately, the crowd is very, very small—Vera says . . . bother Vera’s illustrious maxims! Not all the dyspeptics in the world can kill love! Vera takes her knowledge out of the mouths of wise old people who have ceased to care, and then she scatters it broadcast. There is nothing but stony soil at Russja-Kaja for indifferent theories.

Happy is he who only hears one voice.

I am beginning to understand.

At one time I actually considered McArthur’s nocturnal musings, not only a reprehensible waste of oil—considering his principles—but also a wicked waste of rest.

‘Silly old Scotchman,’ I used to say. ‘We none of us can do without sleep, and one day you will shut your eyes with a vengeance and topple over the lamp, and set your house on fire.’ The sight of his lit-up window, for all its poverty of glare, used to upset me and I would fling myself back into bed with a frown.

Often as not a little voice chimed in—the second voice, which so often spoils our reflections or sets them right :

‘What could it matter?—he can always save himself. The cottage is but a make-believe toy of a spendthrift nobleman; let it burn and clear the ground. A thatched cottage, a ramshackle old cottage of Kent, run up in a Russian park to please the catholic taste of the extravagant Count—let it burn! ’

Then, with a pang, I would remember how utterly stupid the second voice was, in its crude, up-to-date sentiments.

The little old cottage contained treasures.

Amongst other things Eliza's blue satin hair ribbon. A pale, washed-out, sadly faded ribbon. For years it had rubbed against McArthur's heart, in the inside pocket of his coat—until one day it came upon him that relics require softer treatment. He could not very well fix a tall ladder against the sky, and—rather rheumatically—climb to the gates of heaven and ask Eliza for a substitute, perhaps a lock of the precious hair she was so 'stiffish' about. Dear, dear, how handicapped are loving hearts.

No, the old ribbon must last his time. And heaven preserve the picture of his youth to flare up at the last, truly real. McArthur is confident that when his call comes Eliza will step down from her innate pride 'an' come of herself an' fetch him hame.'

It is an idea worth dying for.

What an idyll is love! It can never under any circumstances be poor, or trashy, or cheap. It may keep us awake at night, but it will never leave us sore with the sick headache of a noisy pleasure. I take it that love is best when set to a quiet tune; just one little tune—one little mysterious tune, and yet so perfectly easy to understand.

Last night, with Anthony's letter tucked somewhere close to hand, I kept looking out of my window, feeling so beautifully confident.

The howling, insistent, wicked wind did not affect me in the least.

In fact, never had the old house seemed in a gentler mood.

Outside, the storm in full play.

Inside, a haven of rest.

A haven of garnered treasures, linked memories on a shining chain of love. Outside, a squallish miserable rabble

—high winds, chasing clouds, and inky blackness ; inside, a quiet house, a love house, haunted by memory and alive with expectancy.

The house is always waiting and watching.

Each room has its own particular spirit, its own particular association, its own particular atmosphere.

There is a voiceless music in atmosphere which scales many a tender note and the dominant theme gives for harmony. Like the splashed scheme of a sunrise—all hung in varying colours, and yet so admirably proportioned that no ragged line overlaps the next—so the old home stands out, secure, strongly knit together.

How the wind flared below ! How it shook the elms, pliant as weeping willows ; how it stole out of unexpected corners and rattled the windows of the quiet house. How willingly it would have torn at its very foundation—the storm was at a pitch of frenzy.

No setting for a love letter, but rather a frame of dejection, pity and sorrow—the whole gamut of human passion—pricked in her vitality.

The strength of a storm somehow clogs the power of breath. I gasped as I watched the flickering light in McArthur's window—no keener than a glow-worm on a single leaf of a dense laurel bush.

A drift of light from somewhere—may be a reversed cloud—fitfully lit up the grove of statues. By flashes, I could just discern the blue-white calm of Minerva's noble brow, and the poised grace of Apollo trying his famous leap. Perhaps he was conscious of the beauty around him—the rabble, for all its fierce onslaught, by its very terrifying strength made for grandeur—the sucking winds, the mighty gusts, the hammering up above—for sheer noise and commotion held the stage.

Only the old house remained immovable. With as-

tounding grace she held her measure of memories and remained still, like an aristocrat facing the terrors of revolution.

I could not follow the example of the quiet house and sleep through the banging and the clashing outside . . . hark ! The swirl of rain. . . . McArthur's glow-worm lamp is almost extinguished. . . . I could not see it for the beating rain. On the terrace the sharp drops stung.

It will be better presently. The winds will moan themselves to sleep, as tired children, and later on the earth will breathe pleasantly and the storm will be discussed in a dispassionate spirit.

Anna Nicolajevna will smile at us across the breakfast-table, and hope that we were none of us disturbed by the heavy rains last night.

And then she will pass on to something else—easily, breezily, charmingly, maybe fastening a refractory bangle. (There is no time of day or night that mother discards her bracelets—that is to say the pick of the collection.) As I told you before, value is measured by sentiment at Russja-Kaja. Gladly would Anna Nicolajevna barter her best diamond ring—fashioned of stones picked out of an Imperial snuff-box—for a flawed hoop of seed pearls, an insignificant ring, yet a jewel of price.

In spite of the swirling rains the gales are tearing the space. I can hear them chattering round the corner, moaning and disporting themselves in a frankly pagan spirit. Let loose, once upon a time, they make the most of their opportunity.

I can hear them clapping round the Swiss chalet—always a bleak point—whipping the stagnant lake, sawing at the rotten timber . . . crash ! What was that ?

The cry of some animal in distress.

The wild things of the wood—cowering together and watching for the morning.

The placid morning which is coming by and by. The storm is raging against it even now, and night is fluttering overhead, as some distressed and awful bird dimly conscious of the Great Hunter the searchlight of the dawn.

I turned away from my window, torn between two—no, three—definite purposes.

There is a tumbled stack of disorder for you ! A mind so muddled is best left to itself.

I wanted to turn in, which is idiomatic English for going to bed and sleeping heavily—I wanted to think over a queer visitation—nothing tangible at all, but just the intuition of a mind given to vague impressions—and I wanted to write to Anthony.

All sorts of lovely, impossible, perfectly mad letters flashed into my mind and crystallised on the point of my pen. Letters light as gossamer and solid as invulnerable facts. I covered pages of thin white paper with all the love I was capable of, and all the imagination the gods have allowed me. The gods have been liberal.

By the light of an uneven pair of candles I addressed Anthony. My pen worked almost as fast as my mind. I caught hold of the moment and blotted it on paper.

‘Anthony,’ I scribbled, ‘the most awful night ! The rain is pouring in torrents, and if nothing intervenes, we will be swept off the face of the earth.

‘I can imagine your acute disappointment coming back the day after searching diligently and finding nothing. You will pick your way across void and empty spaces and grow old in your search of Anna Nicolajevna, Jane, the uncles, the noisy twins, the ancient Top-Hat, the decayed and lovely mansion, the worm-eaten summer-houses, the arbour of seven roses, the three terraces, the fountains

which never play, the avenue of limes, and the grove of heathen gods.

‘ Then one day you will go back to your own people and forget Russja-Kaja, remembering her only as a dream, a passing dream, sweet as honeysuckle fanned by the evening breeze. Regretfully you will realise that Russja-Kaja never existed except in the reflection of your own mind ; of substance frail as silver clouds tinged by tenderest rose . . . a dream, nothing but a dream.

‘ Poor old Anthony, I expect you will grow into a morose man !

‘ Wake up, my darling—it is not the flood this time. I tell you the raindrops are only dripping on the terrace below, the wind is almost hushed, the river almost peaceful. . . . Wait a minute—yes, McArthur has put out his lamp and gone to bed, and Russja-Kaja is a fact, a solid, beautiful, heavy fact ! Anna Nicolajevna has not lost an ounce of weight—storms never worry her. Countess Sylvia, your great-great-aunt Sylvia—little coward—used to creep into a cellar and gather the babies under her petticoats when the lightning flashed across the plains. Anna Nicolajevna sleeps a storm down—she never moves, so she says. I believe her. I always believe everything mother says, even when she calls me a fanciful darling.

‘ Anthony, Anthony ! You shadow king come to life ! Think if the storm took you up to heaven and left me mourning ! Most unpleasant. Leaving improbabilities alone, by what earthly right am I so miraculously blessed ? Remember the fate of the sisters. Of course they are happy—but still it is juggling with chance. Are you aware that you arrived just in the nick of time ? Next summer, very probably, you would have found me married—married to a photographic student—or if you prefer it, to a student of photography. I expect my eyes will come out well in a

photograph and that aunt Hélène would make the most of them. She is quite a born matchmaker, and she has judgment. Sascha was not up to her usual form ; no matchmaker is infallible ! Now I am worrying you. Forgive me ? I love you ! That is a nice full stop. . . .'

Scribble, scribble, scribble—the thin pages were fluttering around me nicely blacked—such a pleasant sight for a woman of letters ! Work, which is achieved, lifts a load off the mind—and love letters is a class of work I am going to excel in—I am going to build up a reputation on love letters !

Then, suddenly being a fanciful creature, I dropped my pen and sat staring in front of me.

The uneven candles made but a faint circle of light in the dimness around.

Have you ever been conscious that someone had entered the room without actually hearing their steps ?

I felt I was no longer alone.

Suddenly my heart gave a great thump, I did not feel terrified, only astonished.

There, seated at my stove—a little, footed, low Dutch stove—was a stranger.

I had never seen him before. He had a young face, a self-confident, proud young face.

He looked at me smiling, half rising as I went up to him, shrinking just a little.

'Who are you ?' I whispered.

'Dear child,' said the spirit, 'I have come to serve you. When I heard your voice calling across the distance I decided to obey. It is my business to wander from soul to soul. I have just lived with a cripple. I made him laugh and run. I tapped on the gate of hidden thought and I carried him far. He was quite bedridden. I stood by his side through the patient years. The cripple's world was very

vast yet pathetically restricted. Let us hope your record will be different. Life is the master of the body, I am the master of the mind. Where I choose to enter it is an honour.'

'I do not want you, spirit,' I breathed, watching his confident young face. 'I can do without you. You have come just too late! Anthony has filled my life. Go back to your cripple.'

'He died two minutes ago,' wailed the spirit. 'I closed his eyes and left him at the gate of heaven. His body is lying quite still on his narrow bed, under the eaves of an attic facing a southern bay. For twenty years, without a murmur he has watched the light and shade on the tideless sea—'

His luminous eyes looked straight into mine.

The uneven candles gave a sudden flare, and I saw the spirit distinctly.

He seemed to rise and to wrestle with me.

'Look into your mind, Jane,' he said, 'the empty rooms of your mind! I will paint the world for you! You shall see with my eyes, feel with my heart, understand with my understanding.'

I felt a sting of sharp pain; I seemed to see as in a crystal a vision of passing beauty. As I looked the colours deepened and sparkled with infinite variety.

I grew dizzy at the sight.

'Spirit,' I said, 'I am quite happy. God knows best. I am satisfied!'

He seemed to fade and grow less. Shadows fought in the room and overpowered the thing he carried. I could only see the terror of his eyes.

'Satisfied!' he mocked, 'you miserable fool! Do you realise what you are throwing away? I am life! I am love! I am ambition! Stare at me, Jane . . . keep

me if you can. . . . I made a bedridden cripple leap for joy, I carried him in the spirit thousand leagues away, by fresh and untrodden paths ! I tapped on the gate of light and the sun stood clear and flashed at my bidding.'

His voice rose to a shriek, and all the winds of heaven seemed to mouth their scorn at me—a deserter.

I was paying the price of a woman's love.

I knew it—I knew it.

'Presently you will awake and call me . . . and I will not answer.'

The hideous words fell on my senses dully.

What if he spoke the truth !

Only the spirit could help me—no one else could build a bridge of sighs, solid as cast iron and the wastes of granite hills.

I had dreamed of his coming—lord of things visible and invisible. I had prayed for his guidance.

Grasping Anthony's letter, I fell a-weeping much as a lost child or a lost soul might weep, for ever pacing the Milky Way and never finding the gate of heaven.

I felt the awful loneliness of the coming years. Would the love of Anthony suffice ?

I fell on my knees, hating myself, yet loving Anthony.

'Spirit,' I sobbed, stretching out beseeching hands, 'Love is the best that life can offer. Love is better than art, or creation, or dominion. Love is greater than ambition. Remember my womanhood and forgive the sacrifice.'

The candles guttered and flared out.

Lying on my knees I felt a crushing sense of loneliness.

Presently an overmastering jealousy filled my heart. Where had he gone to ? The spirit had come to me and I

had failed him ; blinded by love, I had failed him ! Who would occupy my just place ?

God—for one grain of faith !

The wind leaped against the windows and rattled the panes.

‘ Anthony ! ’ I cried. ‘ Anthony ! ’

CHAPTER XXIII

A CONFIDENTIAL ADVICE

'WELL, miss,' said McArthur, leaning on his spade, 'in your place I would cling to the speerit. Larning is all very well in its way—I'm na chucking away the sense of larning, but in writing, high-class writing, the speerit is a friend in need.'

I nodded my head.

'Now take the case of Robbie Burns—say a trifle mixed in his cups—drink is one thing and poetry is another, there is no denying it.'

I was not going to deny it.

'Where would he have been, if the speerit hadn't at times jogged his elbow? "Right ye are, me mon," he says, and prompts him kindly, giving him for the whistle of a reedpipe a brain full of ideas—sets 'em down in verse, too, chucking him the proper rhymes—grand! Under such conditions, I rather fancy whisky has a better flavour than most times.'

Even to better Robbie Burns I could not take to whisky neat; I am afraid I would get hopelessly mixed with the spirits.

I sighed, and stroked the base of Minerva.

McArthur came to a full stop and looked at me critically.

'Is it poetry ye be contemplating?' he asked.

'No, not exactly.'

'It is either one thing or the other,' said McArthur decisively, 'never heard of a hare with a fox's tail.'

'Nor have I.'

'Well, then, it is proesy.'

'What?'

'Prose, miss—cheap as grass in June.'

He looked his disappointment.

If I contemplated poetry, the spirit would be sure to start off in mad laughter. 'The idea of it—look at the child; why, she is stone deaf! Here I have stood prompting her till I'm fairly beat, and she has never grasped a word. Look at her own spider-fly work! The waste of paper—the waste of ink!'

I tried to explain it to McArthur. I bungled the matter and got very red over it.

'McArthur!' I ended up, 'I would just hate never getting through with my poor little talent; begging at the gate of Chance until I found myself a grey-haired old lady with misty brown eyes.'

McArthur said I was exaggerating the case.

There was a time when I had yearnings for the literary life. When ambition fired my hope until all McArthur's 'Latiny' could not have taken the wind out of my sails.

I still hope great things—only, just lately, I have found a new window in my soul. Love has blurred the purely 'famous' view—little Jane can no longer see herself a woman writer—only just a woman loved.

Believe me, I have lost nothing. Spirit or no spirit, love is greater than literature!

'I've a saft carner in my heart for verse,' said McArthur, smiling down the tinted grove of statues—'clinking verse, verse as somehow sets you thinking, an' creeps right down into your mind. . . . Now, Burns.'

I know Burns is McArthur's poet. He leads him gently inside the garden of his youth. In the language of the gods, which is always very simple language, he reminds him of the coming and the passing of Eliza.

'I don't blame you, miss!' McArthur said kindly. 'Poetry don't come as easy as flies in August, for most of us—it is a wrench on the majority. An' then, more than likely, no more good than a spent bullet.'

I filtered through his meaning. I am accustomed to McArthur's conversation.

'A poet is born, not made,' I quoted.

'Certainly, miss; whoever said you dressed him up as a scare-crow?'

McArthur's voice whistled.

I walked a pace or two to the left. Then I turned and faced my confidential adviser. The confidential adviser was looking rather as if time were up. Conversation, however important, lies on the borderland of idleness. I knew by the way he was working his spade up and down that McArthur wanted to dig deep—not in my mind.

'I would like to write a—nice book,' I said.

Down went the spade with a vicious thrust. 'If ye wrote a bad one your mither would be in her proper place if she spanked ye across her knee.'

'I am not thinking of morals,' I hastened to assure him, cutting a smile short. 'We have no practice in being immoral at Russja-Kaja; it would be no earthly good if I studied the uncles or tante Katja.'

McArthur grunted at my wit.

'My book would be full of sunshine and pleasant thoughts,' I whispered, clasping my hands together and looking, I dare say, foolish.

'Pleasant reading,' said McArthur facetiously, edging

half an inch closer to me and looking at me keenly. ‘ Is it just a fulish book ye are considering ? ’ he asked.

I shook my head decisively—‘ No ! ’

McArthur steadied the spade against a tree, and took a piece of knotted string out of his pocket. With infinite care he started unravelling it. He was thinking.

‘ A love story, miss ? ’ he suggested after a portentous pause.

‘ I would like to write a love story,’ I replied, secretly delighted at the apt turn of the conversation.

‘ How can ye now ? A babby ! ’ McArthur turned round, almost fiercely ; ‘ a bit of a child ! ’

‘ McArthur,’ I faced him triumphantly, shooting him a starry glance, ‘ I know all about it. I am in love ! ’

‘ Then ye ought to be spanked.’

‘ What nonsense ! Olga married at seventeen and three-quarters and a bit. She is immensely happy. Guns adores her. . . . He—he (I stumbled) he would adore me.’

‘ You do speak with powerful assurance ! ’ said McArthur, pocketing the twine. ‘ An’ where does the book come in ? A mighty weak combination, an’ flighty as a pair of giddy pigeons. Marry him, then, an’ have done with it ! . . . What will the place be like an’ all ye young things gone ? Think of them winters—and her Excellency twiddling polite conversation to the auld parties, and laughter, just shut up in a box, dying of strangulation and suffocation.’

I shivered. McArthur has such a horrid way of putting things.

Again I had to speak up pretty sharply.

‘ Don’t you count the twins and the boys ? ’ I said.

‘ Rowdy,’ said McArthur, and he said no other word. I was the first to break the silence.

‘ I do love him,’ I whispered.

' Beg pardon, miss ! '

I repeated my words in a louder key.

' Let's hope he is a figure of fancy,' said McArthur very cheerfully. ' Write, miss, write.' He waved a sinewy hand with Latin grace. ' I have me suspicions ye are hiding a pretty decent application, a cleverness, miss, an inherited talent—'

Gross flattery.

' How can you ? For one thing, you have never read a line of my work.' (I put it professionally.) ' Love is a spirit, McArthur ! ' I flung down my ace of trumps and left him wrinkling his face in perplexity.

All that evening, after McArthur's advice, I kept watching the little group gathered together in the great saloon.

Such a small party !

Jacques and the twins were playing battle-door and shuttlecock in the billiard room. The billiard table is very worn and cut about, so it has had to descend in the scale. I could hear them striking the balls, and occasional shouts of laughter.

We were unusually quiet in the saloon. By the west window Anna Nicolajevna, tante Katja, and the Enemies were playing a serious game of whist, for love ; the Enemies had cut in for partners, which always gives a certain solemnity to the game. You have got to be very careful not to trump your Enemy's best card.

The old clock ticked loudly on the wall. The old lamps burned dimly. The night was very calm.

I looked at Fanny's empty place. I thought of Vera and Marussa and little Olga. McArthur is quite right, we are in a devil of a hurry to marry.

I could not bear the idea of leaving them—those dear ones, playing serious whist. The summers are all very well ;

it really does not matter two straws if you are married or not—in summer. When the cold weather sets in, when autumn tap-taps at the door, and sends the married ones flying—it is a very different matter.

We do miss Fanny.

Anna Nicolajevna has not the ghost of an idea about—well, about him.

I was never photographed when the photographer took the wedding group last August. By a pure fit of freakish obstinacy I refused to have my first grown-up photograph taken in an ugly, obstinate mood. Oh, I am vain—a rank piece of vanity !

I remember Anthony, at the time, was much amused at my conceit.

He does not know what our photographs mean. You cannot expect it of him. He never dreamed, if I had not been obstinate, that a young man might be tacked round the corner of the very proof itself. One never can tell which ‘fancy picture’ will eventually fill the ornate gilt frame standing on aunt Hélène’s grand-piano.

Mother trusts I am as safe from temptation as a novice who has just taken perpetual vows ; her vision is strictly framed.

Looking at the dear, solemn faces round the card-table, I felt just handsomely mean ! Imagine their surprise !

It took me by surprise.

Not exactly. For some time past I have had an inkling of the truth—a beautiful, fluttering feeling—it is too difficult to explain ; in fact, I am shy about it. I would rather not. All you who have been in love, all you who are still in love, all you who are dreaming of love, be so very kind as to tell the story. You need not say it out loud. Just think it over—your own love story—and it will be far more satisfying, from your point of view, than my poor

little tale, which, after all, strictly speaking, is tinged with selfishness.

Do not say you cannot remember ! Surely you are not so frightfully extravagant as to throw away your sunny memories, or your brilliant expectations ?

CHAPTER XXIV

A GREAT SECRET

THE firelight is playing over Countess Sylvia's own sitting-room.

The polished brass doors of the great stove are flung wide open, and many a good birch log is roaring up the black chimney. It is a capacious old stove of rich yellow tiles, something of an eyesore except on a chilly day when it seems to radiate both light and heat.

Night is coming on apace—October daylight is so soon flung back into darkness.

In the store-room the candles are winking at each other, and the barrels of oil, out in the shed, are oozing with importance.

'We are beginning to count,' they say; 'put by all the summer; ignored, left on a shelf to melt or to grow sticky and dusty—now is our time!'

The wax candles, just imported on the grocery list, shiver with delight inside their blue paper wrappings. 'In which room will we be put?' they ask; 'In the great saloon, in the little dining-room, or are we going upstairs to the bedrooms? Do the corridors run to wax candles? . . . 'No, oil is cheaper, economy is practised in this house . . . ha! ha! he! he!'

Last year's candles are intensely amused. The store-room, which is part and parcel of the house, pays them no attention. The walls sigh. 'Imagine, being a candle and liking to burn! Fire is the one thing we dread,' they say.

The shelves, which are not nearly as old as the house, take the part of the candles. ‘They are made to burn, they are only fulfilling their destiny—made to burn—to burn.’

The candles would dearly love to rise on end and kiss a lighted match. In anticipation they see themselves, a majestic ring, burning evenly in the great crystal chandeliers. Not a single candle, not even the poor creature with a broken wick—half-way down her body—considers the housemaid’s candlestick. ‘Pouff ! what a fatality, to live in an atmosphere of candle grease, moving about in a lopsided manner in the dark mornings, never certain of your place—may be left on a rug in a draught, kept going until you are only a wee bit of a stump, maybe supported on a copper. . . . Mascha is thrifty—very thrifty. Phew ! What a calamity ! . . .’

Uncle Hyppolyth has drawn his chair close to the blazing fire. The light is playing on his ivory features, and tinting the palms of his fragile hands. Uncle Hyppolyth is bending forward, warming his hands at the fire.

It is a wrong thing to do ; people who are liable to catch cold ought never to sit near a fire. It is as bad as sneezing seven times, seven consecutive times, when a friend is watching, and counting.

‘One, two—oh, what luck !—three ! dear, dear !—four—do take care . . . five ! uncle Hyppolyth . . . six !’

‘Don’t mind me, Jane. I believe I have [seven !] caught a chill.’

No doubt about it.

Yesterday uncle Hyppolyth wandered about the house—he was not allowed out of doors, not that he wanted to go—as a frozen and very kind Question—yesterday we still had our doubts. Uncle Hyppolyth’s chests are most alarming ; one can get alarmed at nothing at all.

Uncle Dimitri, being an old soldier, is always the first to scent danger. All yesterday he stormed—at no one in particular—he could not drive conviction home in any special direction, so he contented himself by suspecting us all.

The whole evening he kept looking at the frozen Question, seated in his usual place. He shivered, did uncle Hyppolyth, and tried to make us believe it was only the rocking-chair. He hates worrying us. He dislikes being ill—I suppose he is not unique.

No one likes going to bed and taking to plasters and pills, and black draughts and extra blankets—no one likes answering a thousand questions in the morning, always supposing there is a morning.

Sometimes uncle Hyppolyth's chest keeps him in bed for days, yea, weeks together.

When he does eventually appear, how we cosset him; how tightly the windows are shut; how all his favourite dishes are prepared; how he smiles at us all, a loving, rather tremulous smile. You do not get up your strength in bed. Doctors are fools if they say so.

Our doctor is not a fool—he lives too far away. A practitioner does not come trotting twenty miles out of his way to tell a patient to continue eating porridge, and that a glass of warm milk is an excellent nightcap.

We rarely send for the doctor, being gifted—as a family—with exuberant health. Poor dear uncle Hyppolyth has been cruelly imposed upon. Some people are bound to get the bad shares. There are some inoffensive people Fate delights to buffet. She is in a cynical, sportive spirit when she touches them—far from gently.

'Here is old Hyppolyth,' she says, pointing him out to the ills which flesh is heir to. 'Just you pinch him a bit—give him a nasty threat! Winds of autumn, here is

your chance, blow through the summer overcoat he is wearing by mistake ! Men of law, cheat him through his nose—scatter his roubles broadcast ! Mr. Irony, a moment, good fellow, knock him up against a fight—a fight, do you hear me ? He is great sport in a fight ! ’

Mr. Irony, to please Fate, set him up in a fight with his best friend. He fell out with the bravest man in the world, a very giant of a man, with a great heart and a great body and a splendid record. The ill-matched cocks had to fight. Fate is a stern mistress.

‘ Are you feeling better ? ’ I asked, laying my cheek against uncle Hyppolyth’s hot hand—it was very hot.

I fancy he had been dozing and that he woke up to sneeze.

‘ I am as fit as a fiddle,’ he answered hoarsely. He must have been alluding to a very poor fiddle.

We were quite by ourselves in Countess Sylvia’s own sitting-room.

Mother was reading aloud to tante Katja—they are both keen as mustard about serials, and prefer love stories. Uncle Dimitri had disappeared, he disappeared quite early this morning. He is still out annoying the birds. You cannot, except you are a magician, shoot birds and bag birds in darkness. I expect uncle Dimitri is only potting about the woods in a desultory, angry spirit. Nothing makes him so cross as uncle Hyppolyth’s indifferent constitution.

‘ Will you never learn reason ? ’ he thundered this morning, shouldering his gun, and facing the family. ‘ Imagine sending him out in pouring rain dressed in a tissue-paper costume ! What next, I wonder ? If it pleases you to laugh, Anna Nicolajevna, I can say nothing further.’

Uncle Hyppolyth did not laugh. He never laughs at uncle Dimitri’s wholesale exaggerations—they seem to please him.

Oh, why had we not packed away his summer overcoat in thick layers of evil-smelling moth powder, and hung on the peg the winter fur coat, lined with astrakhan ? Uncle Hyppolyth slips into anything. He would have been just as pleased with the astrakhan coat.

I did not like the feel of his hot hands, and I thought his face, even in the ruddy firelight, which was absolutely scorching me, looked more than common pinched.

He was looking into the heart of the fire as if he were reading something very sad. I wonder what old people read in the firelight ; what scenes pass before them and vanish up the chimney ? That is the worst—or the best—of fire pictures ; they burn so bravely, backed by blue flames, and they vanish so quickly up the black chimney ; no mortal power can keep them for long, except they slip into the heart ; then, if we only have sufficient faith, the pictures glow again, when the red ash is turning grey ; they can keep on glowing when the stove doors are shut. . . .

Uncle Hyppolyth blew a sigh up the chimney. A great log collapsed, and the picture changed.

He noticed me.

‘ There now, child, what a selfish old brute I am, keeping you from the fire.’

The fallen log made a brave show. The firelight danced away and flashed across the portrait of Countess Sylvia and touched the laces of her dress and warmed the red roses in her hand and caught the reflection of the pearls round her swan neck—such a beautiful neck, and a great credit to the artist.

The flames reached out and brought the old escritoire into the circle of warmth ; they played upon its satinwood surface, and the painted tulips grew young, young as spring tulips jewelling an old Dutch garden.

The flames reached higher, embracing the shadows of the curtained windows. The old brocaded curtains—faded green, with tiny woven stars—were shot with gold ; the firelight restored to them their freshness, robbed by the all too ardent sunbeams.

Countess Sylvia's own sitting-room faces due south.

She loved the sun. She never barred the sunbeams. All through the long summer days and, very probably, through the short summer nights, her windows stood open, wide open to the terrace. And honeysuckle peeped in through the window, and a famous climbing rose. We have a shoot off the famous tree, and the shoot is an old, old tree, basking against the south wall, and reaching up to Anna Nicolajevna's bedroom window. It is a marvel it lives through our rigorous winters. It is a miracle. McArthur is convinced it is a 'meericle,' and he faces it round with a wooden shelter come Michaelmas, more from habit than kindly protection. A 'meericle' tree ought to be able to look about for itself ! I wonder ! Life is full of wonder.

The brave old log changed her spaces ; the circle of light narrowed—only a gentle murmur filled the old stove. It was a confidential moment.

' Shall I tell you a story, uncle Hyppolyth ? ' I whispered, stroking his hot hand, ' a true, true story ? '

He nodded his head and waited.

' Once upon a time—oh, years and years ago—when the world was very young and very beautiful, and when an immortal spring stretched across the years as fairy hoops of cherry blossoms, and when the sea never took toll of human hope, and when guinea-flowers—great belled flowers full of honest gold—lined the common road, when castles built themselves all in a night just as hoar frost decks a forest and twines each twig and branch ; when

lovers had it all their own way, and love ran smoother than water.'

I heaved a purring sigh and looked up at uncle Hyppolyth.

'Where was I, dear ?'

'When love ran smoother than water.'

'Listen ! On just such a white morning, a girl stepped into the picture—such a picture ! Let us bring it home. A forest scene all dimpled with light and shade, and full of marvel. A carpet of silver moss, wild berries, and wild flowers, and trees—giants ! Uncle Hyppolyth, you have seen them growing. Perhaps you can recall them when they were comparatively thin, with waists which even I could circle with full-stretched arms. Imagine, old enough to have noticed the forest growing !'

'Yes, Jane—the forest is always moving.'

'Well, listen ! Years and years ago, when the world was very much as it is now . . . uncle Hyppolyth, has it altered ? Has God lifted out of it some of its charm—just a tiny infringement of His fundamental laws ? Are the nights longer and the days shorter than they used to be ?'

'No, dear, nothing has altered.'

'You ought to know. Uncle, when I am as old as you I will never ask questions.'

'You will feel them all the more . . . Life is a mystery, Jane.'

He was looking into the heart of the fire, tracing the white ribbon of life. His roll was nearly wound out—three score years and seventeen—what an age !

I tried to look up the years. I could not look very far. I came to a blank stop when I pictured my first grandchild smiling in my child's arms.

I told uncle Hyppolyth. He smiled and said it was not

bad for an unmarried girl of eighteen—that I need not complain over my eyesight.

I leaned against his chair.

'I am going to be a lovely grandmother,' I said; 'a contented old lady. I will answer all the babies' questions, and kiss them when they push me very hard. . . . I suppose old people know lots?'

'Nothing, nothing at all.' He spoke almost vehemently.
'We leave our knowledge at the gate of youth.'

'What a figure of speech! Who need pass out of the gate of youth?' I took hold of his hot hand and laid it across my cool brow—'Oh, the hot blood of youth!' I said gaily enough, though a sudden grief tugged my heart. I had quite forgotten the fairy story, which was entirely like Jane. I only wanted to rouse uncle Hyppolyth—dreadful, dreadful falling on sad thoughts when the body wants every atom of encouragement. When you are ill you must just send sad thoughts flying—scatter—scatter scatter! It is a principle of profound value and terribly difficult to follow.

'Up on your horse, uncle Hyppolyth, and ride away across the world, the wide, wide, sunlit world, and tell everyone you meet they need never pass through the gate of youth if they have not a mind to do so. Tell them you speak from personal experience, and if they doubt you, hold out to them your heart, your ever young heart, show them your fancy, fresh as buds in May—convince them any way against their will, drive it home to every troubled heart. Only bring them out of the shadows into the broad sunlight, and people will be getting up a subscription list to pay for the keep of your horse out of pure gratitude. . . . Uncle Hyppolyth, have you come across that little corner in youth's garden where all the happenings of life begin? I walked straight into it the other day—fairly

caught. And Cupid shut the door with a bang—silly old Cupid, as if anyone sighed for a loophole of escape—fairly caught in love's garden. . . . Uncle, dear, it is a delicious place ! You know it ? You must have known it ?'

Uncle Hyppolyth, fairly caught, sent a heavenly smile floating up the chimney. The little blue flames grew brighter, they always seem to grow brighter when chased by very nice thoughts.

' I know the place well, Jane,' he said, falling into my mood. ' It has not altered. Believe me, it is always just as bright, just as lovely, just as entrancing as ever. It is the place of immortal spring spanned by your fairy hoops of tinted cherry blossom.'

' Yes,' I assented dreamily.

' I loved her . . . I love her still. I will always love her—just her—just the picture of her, Jane. Such a picture . . . charming and true, youthful and lovely.'

I could scarcely breathe for excitement. I and the dying flames were sharing a grand secret.

I could see uncle Hyppolyth's true love—only I think I put her back at least a score of years in time's beauteous history. I pictured her in a Josephine dress, wearing it with southern grace and looped-up hair and imposing jewels—a Court lady ; uncle Hyppolyth has spent his unpenetrable youth at Court—he met her at a Court ball, no . . . no ! at Russja-Kaja ; she was one of the extravagant Count's favourite young-lady guests. He had such heaps of them, all beautiful, all young, all graceful, all happy—every one with Cupid's special passport into the garden of love.

I sighed.

Suddenly my heart leapt in anger. Oh, the infamous uncle Dimitri—poaching ! I could see him stalk into the garden of love and steal uncle Hyppolyth's sweet lady.

The vileness of it, considering the dozens of beautiful ladies all going for the asking.

He is so very delicate and sensitive, poor uncle Hyppolyth. I wonder he did not die of the shock. I expect his music kept him alive. With all that music in your soul, I expect you are deaf when Cupid behaves as a beast. Fancy letting uncle Dimitri spot his sweet lady ! She was not sweet, she could not have been sweet—false-hearted evil woman ! Why, she was within an ace of breaking uncle Hyppolyth's heart—the monster—the monster !

'He behaved vilely, beyond words vilely,' I said. 'I wonder you can speak of him or at him. You are a saint, uncle Hyppolyth.'

Uncle Hyppolyth drew himself up sharply. He looked round the dim room as if he half expected the sweet lady were herself present.

'All my mistake. I suspected him. Jane, my heart was hardened against him . . . she was not worth it—not my dreamgirl; understand me, she was, she is an angel—but the lady who married a German baron. . . . She threw us both over, clean over with a sweep of her pen. Jane, steer clear of flirts. Flirts are born without souls . . . without souls.'

'Then what is it all about ? Why, you are just silly, too silly for words ! Uncle Hyppolyth, make it up—do make it up ! Set that old flirt between you and clasp hands across her false face. A German baron—did you ever hear of such a horrible ending ? Clear it up, uncle dear, clear up the mystery.'

'I will do it one day,' he said with gentle gravity. 'I will speak openly with your uncle Dimitri. It is a sore subject—a very sore subject for both of us. She played the fool with us, and we followed up the game. That is it, Jane. . . . Some mistakes grow on you ; it is impossible

to shake them off. Little Jane—little Jane, so your time is coming ?'

' It has come ! Only it is a big, big secret. You won't give me away ? '

The red ashes were glowing brightly, yet it was dark enough in Countess Sylvia's own sitting-room. The ghost of the past walked through the room and his wings were heavy with pain.

Only a flirt—only a flirt. Such a mean spider to spoil two lives !

CHAPTER XXV

CERTAINTY

‘WHAT! all in the dark?’ called mother’s cheerful voice from the middle distance.

In the long file of reception rooms the communicating doors are never shut, except for one or two plausible exceptions. The end room of all, graced by the French bed, is always well on view, except when occupied by an honoured guest.

The guest has to be specially tidy. Directly the room is done of a morning the carved folding doors are folded back, and anyone who passes without can fix his eye on the exquisite modelling of the great Louis bed.

The visitor’s personal possessions are invariably hidden out of sight—a pair of slippers or a dressing-jacket would interfere with the just effect of our great-great-grandmother’s bedroom. Even a brush on her toilet chest is looked upon as out of place. A nice-minded visitor uses her drawers and dispenses with powder.

The counterpane of the great bed is still a delight—worked on a pale biscuit ground, trellises of fadeless flowers grow in profusion. The green brocade hangings lag somewhat behind. They have always to be pulled to the best advantage—*t’ja*—brocade of a hundred and seventy years’ standing has the right, the supreme right of going into holes if it cares for such an unsightly exhibition!

Anna Nicolajevna lit the tall table-lamp in the saloon. It is shadeless except for an opaque globe no bigger than a baby's head. Modern lampshades, these huge fluffy creations dear to the heart of Vera, have never entered the doors of Russja-Kaja.

I am sorry to say that particular old table-lamp gives us trouble. It has a way of burning dimly and smelling strongly, which is trying. If you screw up the wick, there is the old wretch smoking away, so we keep it low, and to balance matters light a pair of candles immediately behind.

Mother lit the candles.

Looking out from the darkness of Countess Sylvia's own room across a couple of gloomy rooms, the great saloon appeared more than common gay.

We migrated. Hand in hand uncle Hyppolyth and I came out of the darkness into the light beyond.

Anna Nicolajevna was standing by the table listening.

We heard the sound of a scuffle outside in the corridor—heavy steps and the whimper of a terrified voice.

We recognised the steps. No one has such an unmistakable tread as uncle Dimitri. In his great shooting-boots, watertight and heavy, he would waken the old gentleman who went to sleep for a hundred solid years; what was his name? Rip Van Winkle?

Tante Katja, seated on the sofa, smiled at us gently over her tatting. I do not think she quite took us in. She is always a trifle vague after a 'charming' instalment of the favoured serial. Her gentle old mind is all of a flutter, fanned by fictitious rose leaves.

She is an extraordinarily grateful reader. I recommend her to all young authors. Send your books along. She knows nothing of style—cares less; any writing will satisfy her as long as the matter is steeped in brightness—a sad book! Gentle Christ, she weeps at a sad book; her faded

misty blue eyes fill with tears when she is listening to a sad story.

'Enough, my dear Anna Nicolajevna,' she says when she cannot bear it any longer. Mother is the lectrice of the establishment. Mother dutifully and regretfully closes the sad story. She does not mind in the least if the heroine is having a bad time of it. Her splendid optimism always looks ahead and finishes off the last chapter in a halo of romantic happiness.

'It is bound to come right in the end, dear,' says mother. Sometimes she is wrong—all minds are not built her way ; and then she locks the dark secret in her heart, devoutly thankful she did not continue reading aloud the 'silly' book.

My dear young authors, in a sense you are limited if you want to please tante Katja. Do you mind ? Is it not lovely dabbling in sunshine and letting, as it were, a rain of lilac pass through your thoughts ?

The whimpering voice and the unmistakable step came nearer. The double doors leading into the hall were burst open, flung open, and a tornado of men, a bundle of men, tumbled into vision.

'Dimitri !' began mother, standing very upright.

Uncle Dimitri was holding under one arm the actively protesting postman, under the other the ancient post-bag, and he was terribly excited.

'I found him dead asleep in the Major's cottage—five versts out of his way—settled until morning, and then probably never stirring. The valuable bag used as a pillow, chucked under his reprobate head. It took ten shakes to get him awake, and then I only brought the drink to his feet. He fell down on the floor, sprawled on the floor, while old Tatja tuned up all the devils of the kingdom, howling it was not her fault. He had asked for a bed, and

she had given him an ironing-board, and he stretched himself flat, laid down the whole length of his spine immovable as a stone image, for six solid hours—the best hours of the day, the sun pouring over his face. . . . Tatja continued tuning up a devil of a row.'

(Stop—full stop.)

'And he' (putting the post-bag on the table and letting go of his man) 'a speechless mass of imbecility! An Imperial servant entrusted with his Majesty's mails! Anna Nicolajevna, if it had not been for me—and blessed instinct—you would have been letterless. He would have dropped the bag in the well, someone's well if not your well. It would have trickled down to the frogs below, stuck in the clay, and perhaps forty years after your death someone might have salved it—a chance, the merest fraction of a chance. So I stepped in. I will have nothing to do with chances. I collared the State servant, I collared the post-bag, and I tucked them both under my arms and I tramped through the forest whistling.'

He gave us a snatch of the tune, looking exceedingly good-tempered. Uncle Dimitri loves being useful.

'Think of the children,' said mother, her usual stopgap when uncle Dimitri gets over-excited and plunges in devils—and worse.

She has a terror of crisp language. She is really not thinking of the children in the least, but she knows it worries tante Katja. Tante Katja was educated in the convent for ladies of noble birth, and they turn out their débutantes in most superior manner.

The old postman, as well as he might, stood blinking as a ruffled fowl brought into a circle of light, the cynosure of all eyes. An unenviable position when you happen to be, well, intoxicated, if you think 'drunk' not a ladylike word. I myself never stumble over expressions.

'Your Excellencies,' he murmured, losing half his words in his beard, 'I went to sleep, a blessed sleep, a nap with half an eye open. I deceived no one . . . when his Excellency's shadow filled the room . . . the blessed shadow—the excellent gentleman . . . hands of iron, will of iron . . . I always follow up duty . . . thirty years I have followed the road and duty . . . I venerate duty . . . a pleasure, such a pleasure !'

He lifted his streaming eyes and searched the ceiling for possible encouragement. Finding none, he suddenly collapsed.

Sitting on the floor, he continued his imbecile story within an arm's length of tante Katja's terrified face. (All uncle Dimitri's interference—he ought to have shaken him off by the door instead of letting go his hold right upon the Persian rug.)

No one listened.

Uncle Dimitri paced the floor with giant steps.

'Swine !' he said, coming to a halt.

'Think of the children,' said Anna Nicolajevna, smiling sweetly as she unlocked the post-bag.

'Could not anyone induce him to leave the room ?' said tante Katja almost savagely for her.

'Go away, go away,' murmured Anna Nicolajevna, sorting the letters and beaming over her task and flinging horrible threats to the muddled gentleman on the floor. 'Ivan Ivanovitch, for certain will you live to regret it. If his Excellency had not been guided in your direction I would never have forgiven you . . . never. . . . Fanny and Marussa—how delightful ! You wicked old man, and your grandson just confirmed. The saints will punish you. . . . Anthony, again ! Jane ? Dimitri Andrejevitch, don't stand gaping there, ring the bell and tell Boris to lead him out or drag him out ! Is it a sight suitable for a

ladies' sitting-room? . . . You misery, the gold stripe will be stripped off your shoulder, and you will die a beggar at the feet of St. Isaac.'

'With pleasure—with pleasure.'

He did not know what he was saying. To-morrow he will kiss the hem of Anna Nicolajevna's dress, and she will forgive him.

Boris promptly bundled to-morrow's penitent out of the room.

'Give him some food and make him comfortable,' called mother, fetching the chocolate box.

'Hie! Boris!'

'Yes, your Excellency.'

Uncle Dimitri tapped Boris on the shoulder and spoke in a confidential whisper.

'Not a drop more spirit, even to please Anna Nicolajevna. It is she who ruins the neighbourhood.'

'Yes, your Excellency.'

Down the passage we heard the sing-song chant of the postman.

'With pleasure—with pleasure.'

Exit Inebriety. Enter Suspicion.

With quiet impudence Suspicion seated himself in mother's velvet soft eyes.

'Jane,' she said, with the velvet soft eyes all aglow with a new idea. 'Another letter from Anthony! I don't understand it? I don't really understand it.' She fingered Anthony's letter.

Now her velvet brown eyes glowed lovingly. 'What a shame to tease you. Take your letter, child. I won't ask a single question.'

Suspicion had flown. I think Certainty sat enthroned in Anna Nicolajevna's glorious brown eyes. I expect the charming serial had effectually widened her horizon.

Reading a love story and enjoying it may open out many a shut door and make a mother's heart understand. No serial in all the world is as interesting as your own daughter's love story.

Uncle Dimitri, meaning ever so well, gave a shock to opportunity. I was just about to speak, glancing for support at dear uncle Hyppolyth, who was rocking gently in his own chair.

'Post-cards!' said uncle Dimitri, coming forward and directly blocking my view of Anna Nicolajevna's most certainly beautiful brown eyes. 'Coloured picture post-cards—the envelope is packed full of them. All foreigners delight in views; kind of madness of a most insidious growth. Anthony is a keen collector. Told me so himself. And now he is amusing himself after his own heart at Moscow. What is easier to explain? He does not burden you, Anna Nicolajevna, he bothers Jane!'

'Dimitri,' said Anna Nicolajevna, 'you must be famished. Supper will be ready in a minute. Make yourself presentable, and don't talk nonsense.'

Uncle Dimitri left the room, trying to look imposing. But when a woman is up against a man, what can a mere man do? Ask the Major!

CHAPTER XXVI

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

PRICK a secret and it is bound to come out.

Old Boris, in his most conscious manner, filled the best cut glasses with father's noted sherry—an heirloom dating from the extravagant Count's first and only visit to England. He brought back with him sherry and port bought in the City, 'a full-bodied wine.' And McArthur—McArthur ripe with 'practical experience' in spite of his youth. Not that McArthur, from his infancy upwards, could ever have been skittish : I cannot see him prancing round the fair, a favour in his button-hole as big as a cabbage ; the frock coat flying at an acute angle ; the top-hat all of a slipper, which means sliding off ; the Latiny tongue wagging cheerful nonsense in common vernacular—it is just past human fancy.

Mother had a suspicion of tears in her bonnie brown eyes as she solemnly proposed Jane's health and her pleasing prospects.

Uncle Hyppolyth, who, according to all rules and regulations, ought to have gone early to bed—supperless, or at most a basin of gruel—waived tradition and sat up late, very gay and very pink in the face.

Anna Nicolajevna looked at him several times during supper, in doubtful criticism. She suspected fever, but she put it down to proper excitement.

We were such an excited party sitting round the reduced dining-room table ; we had such a lot to talk about, so

many questions to ask, so many questions to answer, so many mysteries to clear.

'Anyhow, I intend to scold Anthony,' said mother. 'His very good health, darling—and all the luck in the world ! Yes, Dimitri, what is it ?'

'Such owls,' said uncle Dimitri, who justly considers himself a very wide-awake bird.

He boasted of his second sight. He had scented the trail all along. In fact, he had helped us, backed us up, laughed at us a good deal. 'Sheep, my dear—such woolly sheep—heads in the bush and all the rest of them plainly naked.'

'Uncle Dimitri !'

I made a clutch at him. He held me in a vice. There was no moving.

'Dear uncle Dimitri.'

A gentle voice disarms a giant. He let me go. But he kept the table in a roar. Even tante Katja refused to be shocked. I believe she quite forgot she was educated in the Convent for Noble Ladies.

Anthony's ears must have tingled, even if he was sitting sorting his picture post-cards, such nice things were said of him.

'An Englishman, an Englishman—glory !
And love is a sweet old story.'

Uncle Dimitri looked round the table expecting applause. He has a great idea of himself as an impromptu poet.

We jeered at him. We said it was the most rotten poetry we had ever struck.

Uncle Hyppolyth coughed. It might have been an honest cough, only excitement and happiness always turns us into a whole company of drolls, ready to walk on.

Poor dear tante Katja, she was not born to irresponsibility ; she is just a good dog Toby trained to perfection.

I tell you it is good training living in a good-tempered family.

'Tell your uncle Dimitri,' said uncle Hyppolyth to one of the twins, 'that I have heard verse which has pleased me less.'

And he smiled—into his rich cut wine-glass, of course.

Uncle Dimitri gave a splendid bow.

'Tell your uncle Hyppolyth,' he said in the ear of the other twin, 'that I fully appreciate the compliment. There would be no anarchy or socialism in this glorious world if we remembered the gentleman one step behind. . . .

"A bad place, sir? Look behind, sir, a little chap just up to your shoulder—now he can't see nothing, nothing at all, sir. . . . Yes, sir, there is a baby behind you, and it can't see nothing at all, you standing right side up. . . . No use crying, baby, the kitten just born is much worse off—sees nothing, not even your blue shoes. . . . '''

Anna Nicolajevna said uncle Dimitri the philosopher outrivalled uncle Dimitri the poet.

'It is always so,' he said gloomily, 'you yearn to shine as a sentimental fellow, a woman's man, and all you are good for is rugged oratory, a slap-dash sledge-hammer mouther of words—a profound nuisance.'

'Hear, hear!' called Jacques derisively, getting up and banging his chair.

And tante Katja only smiled.

Even the English governess smiled. And all the windows were as tightly glued as sealing-wax, drying nicely. The little dining-room was powerfully hot. The great white stove had had an extra firing. I do not know if it was in honour of the Secret on parade, or just to humour uncle Hyppolyth's cold.

I am afraid we rather forgot his cold, there is no room for rejoicing in miserable doubt. We accepted his chest

as the most solid piece of tinkering ever contrived by nature—a chest to face the rawest east wind which ever blew, only braced by the effort. There is a chest for you !

Mascha, who always catches wind of a secret and loves to thrash it out was apparently waiting for the supper-party in the Blue Room. She was ostensibly dusting. She was dusting, practically all in the dark. Bad for the china figures. Only I expect they knew the power of a quill—certainly a fine quill, but still a quill; you cannot do much harm with a feather, can you ?

Mascha dusted the china figures as if her life depended on it. She never turned round. We caught the silhouette of her wide figure and her bent back—we heard her mumble ‘St. Nicholas be praised !’ Probably she had just escaped a footstool.

‘Mascha !’ called Anna Nicolajevna, ‘there is a time for everything.’

She appeared in the doorway blinking, curtseying. Mascha’s flexible knees are another *tour de force* of Mother Nature. She can curtsey as a young girl, and she can pick herself up from the floor with the ease of Vera’s fat baby.

She took the Secret in her own manner. She shared it with St. Nicholas, of course, but she was not delighted. The saint might have been very pleased ; if so, she did not agree with him.

She thought it a mighty poor thing, Miss Jane marrying an Englishman and living amongst heathen. It is terrible ignorance, but Mascha will bunch all foreign nations together ; she sees no difference, morally speaking, between ‘darkest China’ and the brightest acre in London town.

We led her thoughts away from London town.

‘Miss Jane will live in that lovely gabled house,’ said Anna Nicolajevna, leading the way into Countess Sylvia’s own sitting-room, and holding up her lamp in front of a

water-colour drawing, a sunlit picture of the old Manor House in Kent.

'I have never noticed it,' said Mascha, peering into the ivy-covered walls and covering the front door with a toil-worn finger.

Fancy, dusting a picture for forty years and never noticing it!

I think we all saw the familiar picture in a new light. We have always admired the home of our great-great-grandmother; admired the wall of massive trees to the left; admired the clipped yew walk to the right; loved the old casement windows, and counted over the many gables, clearly defined against a blue sky, a tone or two paler than the weather-cock on the red-tiled roof, painted to match. You have heard of a blue bird, but you have never heard of a blue fox, have you?

We stood in a circle admiring my future home. The picture was painted more than a hundred years ago. Houses do not change. Maybe the ivy is of somewhat denser growth, maybe the flowers have changed their order, maybe the old fig tree up by the great brick wall has withered, and the lilies of an entirely new race wave their heads over the sundial, where our great-great-grandmother Sylvia walked in the moonlight amongst the Canterbury bells? Perhaps the fox has changed colour? Essentially there will not be any difference. I am so delighted.

To wind up the evening uncle Hyppolyth proposed some music.

Uncle Dimitri—the watch-dog uncle Dimitri—seconded the proposal, which only shows that he must have left his thoughts snugly tied up in the house of fourteen gables.

As a rule, when uncle Hyppolyth is ill, or going to be ill, we refuse to listen to him—no thank you, no extra fatigue for uncle Hyppolyth.

Besides, under the sad circumstances, uncle Dimitri would look black as thunder right through the most exquisite rhapsody ever composed and poured out on the full flood of a human soul. He would contrive to look so fearfully wicked, that he would fill the great saloon with ugly spirits, embodied spirits, winking spirits, terrible spirits. There is no one like uncle Dimitri for giving you the shivers.

To-night we were all for music.

Uncle Hyppolyth played exquisitely.

He quieted us.

Sentiment filled the old room. Thoughts grew alive, winged with dead delight for mother, tante Katja, and the uncles. We young ones—with no retrospect—had an uninterrupted view of a new country, and we peopled it according to our individual taste.

Then suddenly uncle Hyppolyth quietly fainted. Uncle Dimitri made one step of it and caught him in his arms.

He has passed a good night. He really seems no worse for his unprecedented behaviour.

Anna Nicolajevna is keeping him in bed.

She assured us all at breakfast it was just a precaution. There was nothing seriously the matter with uncle Hyppolyth.

Uncle Dimitri took recourse to glum silence ; it sounds a trifle more cheerful than to say he was sulky. He ate his breakfast—rather a good breakfast—in complete silence. The big clock on the dining-room wall struck ten.

Uncle Dimitri jumped up from the table as if he had been shot.

We heard him stride down the passage.

Anna Nicolajevna, with an unaccustomed frown on her forehead, poured herself out a second glass of tea.

'Is there anything I can do?' asked uncle Dimitri, with sudden fierceness, in the doorway. 'I am only pottering around.'

He stared at mother.

He stared unkindly.

'All of a piece,' he said. 'What can beat a woman's senseless folly?'

Mother sipped her tea.

'Go away,' she said generously. She might have said 'beast.'

Behind his immense back we always laugh at the fussiness of uncle Dimitri—his body does not suit his character. It is a meagre woman's part to contrive a mountain out of a mole-hill, to worry herself ill over an exaggerated view of the case.

I can tell you, when the dear invalid is up and about again, we do not spare the giant. We taunt him. When uncle Hyppolyth is up and about uncle Dimitri is a lamb.

Very probably mother, who never bears malice, will, on passing by uncle Dimitri, bend over his chair and lightly kiss his forehead, or stroke his magnificent shoulder; there are a thousand ways a woman can show her sympathy, and mother's sympathies are always with the fallen.

In face of the risen uncle Hyppolyth, rocking peacefully in his chair, she can afford to be generous and pass over the giant's temper.

Anna Nicolajevna is a first-class nurse.

She is not fussy. She knows what to do. She never mixes her medicines. She never contradicts her orders. I believe solely to take advantage of her ministrations uncle Hyppolyth has been known to stay an unnecessary day in bed. Can deceit go further?

When he is ill we all attend on him. The twins will

walk miles of their own accord—no prompting of the English governess—in search of a certain forest flower appreciated by the invalid. Sometimes in their zeal to please him they forget or ignore the seasons. No flower in the world will generously wait until October if it is its nature to bloom in August ; it is rank folly on the part of the twins. However, they never come back empty handed. If they find nothing else they will decorate the sick room with a trail of painted brambles, a still exquisitely green fern, a cluster of sharply-cut moss, or a bunch of pink heather.

Tante Katja always makes a point of lending the invalid her llama shawl, soft as lamb's fleece, and so comforting. Uncle Hyppolyth accepts it very gratefully. Anna Nicolajevna wraps it round his thin shoulders, and if she sees a distinct sign of improvement, if the rasping noise inside his chest is toning down, giving up the struggle against steam kettles and noted plasters, she will remark, with her brown eyes dancing with youthful fun :

' I believe you are only pretending. You are as well and as strong as a horse. Chicken broth, indeed ! ' she will give a contemptuous shake to uncle Hyppolyth's luncheon basin, ' what would a horse say to chicken broth ? Not a thank you, I will be bound ! You will have a beefsteak to-morrow, Hyppolyth, and you will eat it—tomato sauce and mashed potatoes and a glass of Burgundy. . . . '

Mother has a great belief in St. Paul's advice to Timothy.

Kasimir when he is at home shows his sympathy by playing on his violin a piece of music for the benefit of the invalid.

He will stand up by the window and fiddle away to all intents and purposes as if he were a musician.

Uncle Hyppolyth has taught him. When first they started their lessons the Master had a bad time of it. It

really shook him intensely to hear Kasimir play. He showed false notes with beautic deafness.

His notes are quite steady by now. One can listen to his tunes entirely unmoved.

A very great advance.

So he is allowed to play to uncle Hyppolyth. The master will treat him ever so leniently.

'Thank you, Kasimir, thank you so much.'

Tante Katja, who loves a melody, even a soulless melody, will beam across the room and call out with honest conviction :

'Was it not pretty ! He has a talent. Why, Hyppolyth, you could not have done it better yourself—play it again, dear boy.'

And the dear boy, nothing loth, plays it again.

Uncle Hyppolyth has been asking for Kasimir to-day.

It was with difficulty mother caught his words.

'Anna Nicolajevna,' he said, 'send Kasimir here. I would like to hear him play the Stephanie gavotte.'

Kasimir is in Petersburg.

We have telegraphed for him.

We have also telegraphed for Vera.

Uncle Hyppolyth is very fond of Vera. When he first arrived at Russja-Kaja Vera took him under her especial protection. I rather fancy it was cupboard love on Vera's part—she showed an extraordinary interest in the black pig-skin bag, the flashy brass lock, and the heavy nails took her fancy. The bag opened with a delightful snap, and it was full of treasures. There were pictures in it, and ornaments, and poets, a heterogeneous collection. Uncle Hyppolyth removed his vests and collars, but, I believe, solely for the benefit of Vera, he never emptied the bag entirely.

Uncle Hyppolyth has always spoilt her terribly, from the very first day of their friendship. At every opportunity she would escape from the nursery, race down the passage, and knock at uncle Hyppolyth's door. If he did not answer she would open the door, climb into a deep corner of his sofa and wait for him. More than likely she scolded him when he arrived.

She was allowed to finger all his treasures with one exception.

Only at a respectful distance was she permitted to stroke the violin. Uncle Hyppolyth held it up for her, and she was allowed to pat its neck. Vera with quick intuition grew to adore the violin.

She loved plunging her arms into the wide mouth of the black pig-skin bag and fishing for treasures. She knew them by heart—after all, the collection was limited—I am afraid she left her mark on several. She bit the poets, she dog-eared the pictures—poor little unframed pictures, she dealt unkindly with the ornaments.

And when she was tired of them she pushed them all of a heap in a corner, slipped off the edge of the sofa, and ran away without as much as a thank you, leaving 'her uncle' to tidy up. Babies really have no manners.

Vera will never allow that we, who came later, have the same proprietorship in uncle Hyppolyth.

'Why!' she will declare, 'what a preposterous idea! He is my uncle. I took splendid care of him when he was young. I have often pulled his hair. I have smashed his lucky pig.'

When Vera puts it like this we none of us oppose her claim. She has toiled for her share of uncle Hyppolyth's heart. We are thankful for the crumbs.

In spite of Vera's boasting, the crumbs are honest, sustaining slices.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PASSING OF UNCLE HYPPOLYTH

UNCLE HYPPOLYTH is resting.

He does not take much notice of us. He has been very restless—at times delirious. The fever left him exhausted. Bend you ever so close, the chest will not worry you ; the chest is toning down. The noted plasters, the steam kettles, the nurses, the doctors—they have all done their futile best.

It is no use.

Let him rest.

Uncle Hyppolyth is dying.

We have known it for two or three days. It has been hanging over us like an appalling shadow. Valiantly we have fought the thing—that hovering awful spirit which men call death.

How dare it come into a quiet, peaceful home ? Just when we were all so happy ; just when we wanted uncle Hyppolyth—badly. When someone you love is slipping off the chain of life, I expect he is always wanted. When he is there to hand, maybe you pass him over. You glance at him and never think about mercy. Mercy—thank God, he is quite well. . . .

Uncle Hyppolyth knows it himself. I have watched him smile at the steam kettle. He prefers to smile than to talk. Words choke him. His breathing has been awful —each breath a knife in our hearts.

Uncle Dimitri is quite changed.

It is pathetic to see him moving about the house. He is quite quiet. No swearing, no uncertainty, no reproaches. His enemy is setting sail across the tideless sea.

Poor, frail uncle Hyppolyth, all alone on that black journey ! He will arrive so shattered on the other side.

May he leave his doubt on earth !

His eyes have such a wistful expression. His eyes will travel as far as he can see, across his big, rather dark room, looking, searching.

He has never asked for uncle Dimitri.

Never by so many feeble words. He has asked for Vera, he has asked for the Stephanie gavotte. He has noticed the twins. He has joked with tante Katja. He has obeyed Anna Nicolajevna. He has been polite to the doctor. I wonder what earthly use they are in the world ? When you really want them, when a man is dying, they are just as much good as a rotten pole.

Uncle Dimitri fetched the doctor.

He is always going errands.

Last night some trifle was required at the chemist's—a little box which slipped into uncle Dimitri's waistcoat pocket. He rode all the way into town at a gallop, ringing up the chemist in the middle of a black night.

No use refusing a giant—a trembling, eager giant with a wild manner. The chemist rose and supplied him.

Through the black night uncle Dimitri thundered home again, splashing through the quagmire roads, facing the winds, tearing over the marshes—alone with his sorrow, alone with his conscience—alone with his God. . . .

Uncle Dimitri has his own seat in the sick-room. A chair has been placed for him in front of the screen. He will sit for hours in a cramped attitude listening to uncle Hyppolyth's breathing.

Uncle Hyppolyth does not know he is in the room.
When he is conscious his eyes rove—seeking, searching,
asking.

Does Memory fling a garland over a death-bed ? Do pale hands play with the roses and gently touch the withered thorns ? Are all things plain in the coming dawn of a new day ?

At times uncle Hyppolyth looks so peaceful. His pale hands lie immovable on his patchwork quilt.

Vera made him the quilt.

Everything in his room has come to him in packets—in Christmas or in birthday wrappers. He is always getting presents, uncle Hyppolyth.

On his last birthday Vera gave him a vase, and Vera's fat baby gathered the rose inside it.

Life repeats itself in an old home. Last summer Vera's fat baby negotiated herself into the deep corner of uncle Hyppolyth's old sofa and played with the black pig-skin bag.

The bag has never retreated to the box-room.

There is a delicacy about touching uncle Hyppolyth's private belongings. People like, when visiting, to have their own things about them.

The black pig-skin bag, growing rusty, lives under the mahogany side-table.

It is a crowded room. Just imagine, twenty-one birthdays and twenty-one Christmases—and Lord knows how many nephews and nieces and kind friends—the ornaments require accounting for. The broken lucky pig has been duplicated seven times seven—not always in the form of a pig—luck has as many faces as an emotional actress.

Luck and love and kind thoughts—a comfortable trio—have lived in the old square room, lurked behind the flowered paper, smiled from the dim gilt-framed mirror—uncle Hyppolyth's toilet glass.

Everything has its own place in the big room.

Uncle Hyppolyth is the soul of neatness.

The short day is drawing to an end—an unusually dark day.

Over the hills a lowering light. Over the forest a sweep of angry clouds. A bitterness in the air, a bleak, cold bitterness.

The house feels very cold.

It looks wretched—unplastered, uncared-for. A wisp of a creeper flapping in the face of the wind—a leafless creeper, just one black tendril idly flapping over the front door. . . .

No one binds it back.

No one has the heart to interfere with the creeper.

Uncle Hyppolyth is dying.

Perhaps when the snow-clouds break to-morrow he will have arrived ?

There is rather a vast possibility in the thought.

When we arrive ! The breathless wonder of the new life ! Uncle Hyppolyth will not be afraid when he sees his Pilot face to face. He will surely be happy ?

God will relieve him of his years. I cannot fancy age and delicacy up in Heaven—they would be so out of place. For the matter of that, I cannot fancy anything in Heaven. Such a vague crowded hall, gates of pearls and singing multitudes and rainbow seats—and where are our human, living, pulsing feelings—where ?

I cannot take hold of the crowd of ethereal worshipping spirits, sinful souls made perfect. Why should death make anyone perfect, or damn anyone completely ? Heaven and Hell—what vague, impossible sounds.

Dear uncle Hyppolyth, come back to us and tell us of the things you have seen.

God shuts His door on each dead soul.

And we, looking up to Infinity, to the voiceless spaces above us, only feel the cold below, and our tiny shattered circle.

The link of life will grow again.

Imperceptibly, gently, the folded buds of spring will open to a new life. Another will fill the dead man's place. It is life's revenge on death. It is death's gift to life.

The old house seems to share our sorrow. From her loftiness she seems to grasp our littleness.

' You humans,' says the old house, ' when all is told and done, how short is the span of your life. . . . I have watched so many of you come and go . . . come and go.'

She breathes her sympathy so gently that she seems to bless us.

Through the long file of quiet rooms her spirit seems to wander, embracing all inanimate objects.

Even the disused furniture, forlornly waiting its time up in the loft, seems to echo her sentiments.

' Those laughing dear children—how short are their days. A decade of honeysuckle blossom and childhood lilt towards its happy close. Youth takes up the melody in stronger, sweeter form. Maturity seizes the overflowing cup. Age wrenches it from her hand—and their Maker sends in His reckoning. . . . '

The God of humanity, the God of destiny, the God of the just and the unjust.

' Fate is impartial. Not one of them by a single day can lengthen their allotted time,' it is written. . . . The futility of dreams, of achievements, of life itself. . . .

There is an undercurrent of jealousy in the dirge of the despised furniture. Each piece is frankly jealous of the humans—the people who fill the old house with ruling life—the people who light the candles in the crystal chandeliers.

When all is said and done, we do matter !

Each failure, each success has its notable meaning. Each life has to answer for its stewardship. The house is but the frame of individual existence.

We score !

The glory of life ! The glory of thought ! Would you part with one of those precious winged moments when silence fills your world ?

Do you not love silence ? The silence of an old house, the silence of inanimate things, the silence of your own heart ?

Questions are so troublesome when there is no one clever enough to answer them.

God keeps His secret jealously. No man preaches from knowledge—at most from conviction and sincerity—two powerful assets in the power of faith. Faith is all very well in time of health—it requires a deal of support in sickness. I do not suppose Luther's voice would have carried the distance it did if its doctrines had lacked faith—men approve of a faith spoken in faith—a very kindling torch in times of uncertainty. After all, it is satisfying to be swept along, as it were, off your feet by some tremendous influence—following your leader in blind affection. Luther never would have done the work he accomplished, thundering from worm-eaten pulpits, if he had lacked a strong personality. His eye backed up his faith.

You know what I mean. Faith is utterly unconvincing in the hands of the wrong man. His belief may be the most glorious thing in the world, he may be an angel or a martyr, but if he cannot express himself, he will never set the mills of God grinding.

Besides, if someone you love is on the point of death, will any sermon satisfy you—any piping of mere man ? What does he know ?

I expect we have to unfold the book of revelation according to our own ability, and that all creeds are

acceptable to God. The great thing is to have some belief. It must be awful to face the chasm of death seeing only a bottomless pit. . . . Is it better to see a burning lake and all your sins marching towards you ready to throw you in ? A harsh doctrine.

Dear uncle Hyppolyth, he has the supreme consolation of seeing the cross and his crucified Saviour. He has the religion of a child.

I believe in his gentle influence.

He has not lived in vain. . . .

The old house is very silent.

From room to room her spirit moves with solemn step and slow.

Death is a distinguished guest.

Towards evening the wind fell.

Just before dusk the sun, which had been invisible all day, faced uncle Hyppolyth's window—she showed as a belt of colour over the hills. Her light fell upon the river, her parting rays caught the pinnacle of the village belfry.

You might have fancied a great stone rolled away, showing the gate of Heaven. All day snow-clouds have blocked the passage of the sun—hurrying, angry, wind-swept clouds. The wind has dominated everything.

Anna Nicolajevna lit the shaded lamp in the sick-room. Then she went to the window and looked out, down the ghostly drive, stretching away towards the high-road. She listened.

Silence.

Would the children arrive in time ?

It is rather pathetic how hope dwindles. Two days ago we never considered time. . . . Later on, when uncle Hyppolyth was convalescent—time enough for the Stephanie gavotte . . . time enough for Vera's gay chatter ; her

descriptions of Paris could well wait until uncle Hyppolyth could better appreciate her conversation . . . He really was too ill to be worried now. . . .

Would they arrive in time?

He has been sinking all day. Only at long intervals has he known us. With delirious exactitude his mind has harked back to old times—very old times, when he was young in a very young world. Such a gay world, such a nice world. Uncle Hyppolyth had an awfully good time of it when he was young.

Uncle Dimitri was never far out of the picture.

The gay, the splendid, the beloved Dimitri.

In his delirious wanderings uncle Hyppolyth explained the depth of his affection for his enemy.

And uncle Dimitri, sitting on the other side of the screen, with his head bowed in his hands witnessed to the steadfastness of a lifelong friendship. The delirious pleadings of his friend tortured him.

Anna Nicolajevna crossed the room and sat down by uncle Dimitri. She did not look at him, but she took hold of his hand.

'When he wakes,' she whispered.

Uncle Dimitri lifted his head and smiled.

The steady light of the little lamp fell upon the violin-case. It was locked. The key was suspended by a piece of green sarcenet ribbon over the tarnished gilt mirror.

The shoes, under the table, were in shadow. All the corners of the room were dark. From the curtainless window a faint ray of light fell upon Vera's picture as a baby, an enlarged and tinted photograph. Vera's red-gold curls were at that time pale as yellow floss silk. Her eyes have not changed. She has kept her baby eyes, her laughing, smiling, baby eyes. . . .

The door opened gently. Tante Katja, wrapped in

her black silk shawl, came in and sat down by the window.

Mother smiled.

There was nothing to be said.

The old clock on the wall ticked out the flying minutes.

Could life have given uncle Hyppolyth a more perfect parting present than the restored confidence of his enemy ?

I do not know how it came about. I believe they both—as I imagined they would—called out simultaneously, ‘My fault, entirely my fault,’ and then I expect uncle Dimitri, kneeling by uncle Hyppolyth’s bedside, accepted the feeble clasp of his enemy’s tired hand as a ratification of all their secret longing. They made it up entirely and perfectly. They talked together—they addressed each other by name. ‘Dimitri, do you remember . . . ?’ ‘Hyppolyth, it seems but yesterday. . . .’ By mutual consent they put behind them the twenty lean years, the twenty years of obstinate pride and sullen temper. Falling on his knees beside his dying friend, uncle Dimitri revelled in the glitter of their unshadowed affection.

We let them talk, we let them whisper, we left them in perfect quiet. A film came over uncle Hyppolyth’s dear eyes—a film of tears. Oh, such glad tears. He was setting out on his long journey a free man. Jealousy, doubt, anger swept away—only love, like two great wings bearing him up above the black and noisome chasm.

Death, where is thy sting ?

The sick-room throbbed with rejoicing. I am sure it was peopled with the waiting angels. A whole crowd of them had come down from Heaven to properly escort uncle Hyppolyth’s soul to the throne of God.

He might have seen them for all we knew. Did not his eyes travel past the hungry face of uncle Dimitri, the sweet

face of Anna Nicolajevna, the troubled face of Jane, tante Katja's white profile, tante Katja's folded hands, the nurse in the distance, the white-uniformed nurse, watching us all with an unmoved countenance? What did he see beyond the four walls of life, the four walls which shut us in and cramp our human thoughts? What did he see? We cannot say. Something very delightful, anyhow.

I shall always carry uncle Hyppolyth's last smile in my heart—maybe it will help me when my time comes. Such a touchingly confident smile—a smile of deep thankfulness. His youth had blessed him, and his death had crowned him. Our love, our human love, took him to the brink of the ford.

We left him in charge of the angels.

Vera cried bitterly when she arrived. The angels might have waited just a little longer. She never caught the last smile of uncle Hyppolyth.

And being Vera, full of kindness and thoughtfulness for others, she let her tears fall on uncle Dimitri's face. They comforted him amazingly.

'Never mind, dear, he is happy.'

She looked at the dead face of 'her uncle,' and uncle Dimitri quite agreed with her.

All night the snow fell.

In the morning the sun shone upon the first snow of winter. What a miracle!

Down the Broad Walk a pall of white snow, softer than velvet, a powdering of snow on the gnarled old fruit trees.

The roof of McArthur's little cottage—the ridiculous little thatched Kent cottage—was quite hidden by the snow. In his window stood a flowering geranium plant. The three red blooms looked out upon the matchless snow.

The sun shone on the forest. The great old firs looked

surprisingly dark against the snow, the fields of untrodden snow.

The wintry sky was blue—a cloudless, sunny winter sky.
Over the river the bells were tolling.

At first, looking out of my window, I could not connect the bells with Russja-Kaja's distinguished guest.

He had come and gone.

The white man in his black shroud—the horrid white man—I remembered Mascha's folklore. The people converse with death as with a familiar friend. Mascha would always sweep a curtsey to the white man in the black shroud. She is always on the look-out for him. She would not be surprised to meet him on the footpath across a field of ripe corn, or to find him seated in her poor little room in her modest arm-chair.

Mascha talks of him in a very familiar way.

Death seems to her but a little break in life.

What a glorious religion !

To-day, on uncle Hyppolyth's death day, the white snow is covering the black earth in his honour—a symbol of faith between God and man.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DEALING WITH MANY THINGS AND ENDING WITH LOVE

THE first snows of winter are always so dazzlingly fair ! How they change the face of the earth ! We can go to bed in darkness and wake up to the quiet of a snow-bound world, broken, maybe, by the far-off sound of a timely sleigh-bell, dying away or drawing nearer as the case may be. I love the sound of bells ringing far across the wastes of snow.

The morning broke very fine and clear on the day we laid uncle Hyppolyth to rest—a white sunny morning with a kind of breathless feeling in the air peculiar to the north. To crown the beauty of the morning, a sharp frost had decked the trees, for miles around, in a uniform coating of crystal bugles very fair to look upon. For the last time uncle Hyppolyth passed down the Broad Walk in a blaze of sunshine, under the white apple trees laden with snow. All the morning the church bells rang their solemn notes, rocking in the little belfry tower, close to an open grave. One grain of comfort in our sorrow : in spite of the snowfall, we were able to bury uncle Hyppolyth properly. The ground frost, as yet, was only surface deep, and did not defy pickaxe and spade. If uncle Hyppolyth had died during mid-winter he would have had to wait until spring for a proper interment. I would not be a New Year corpse for anything ! It must

be depressing to bide your time in a mortuary chapel, even if you are lying in a consecrated and nailed-up coffin. By common report, the dead never rest until they are decently underground : given a favourable night, of a certainty they walk out of the mortuary chapel (heedless of bolts and bars), stamp about the frozen churchyard, rattling their bones in cold misery, and bend enviously over the quiet mounds, caressing the crosses raised to more fortunate souls. There is more truth in superstition than the wise care to entertain. Why not this penance of semi-consecration—why not ? I am always asking questions and never hoping for an answer. One thing is certain, the relatives of New Year corpses never pass the jealously locked doors of the mortuary chapel without murmuring a prayer and shooting a strange glance at the cold storage. Some pray for the loved one's well-being, others again stare at that barred door as if they expected to see their dead taskmaster march out in his grave-clothes and fling them his unpaid score—a bad conscience is a scourge in the hands of cowards.

Never did a gentleman pass beyond more truly mourned than dear uncle Hyppolyth. Out of respect to him we did not shed tears when we gathered around his open grave—uncle Hyppolyth never liked tears ; to please him we all of us joined in the resurrection hymn, and if some of our voices quavered I hope he pardoned us. It is so very natural to grieve. Many a long day his empty rocking-chair will startle us. It is difficult to forget the little things of life. The little things of life remain, poignantly real, when the big things have passed away. We may forget the heroism of uncle Hyppolyth's character, his tragic history, his playful fancy which tuned up so many a cheerful evening for our mutual benefit ; but gathered together in the old saloon, that impregnable stronghold of delicious sentiment,

we will not easily put aside the memory of his delicate face, his fine old features, his attenuated form rocking to and fro in his own chair ; he belonged to the room as much as the central beam in the low-pitched ceiling ; for many a long day, when evening falls, we will watch the quiet chair standing in a corner.

You may be sure of it that we had cousin Anthony's whole-hearted sympathy in our bereavement. There was nothing perfunctory in his manner of kissing Anna Nicolajevna when he, on hearing the sad news, returned to Russja-Kaja. As to mother, she received him as a son and returned the kiss with interest.

'My dear,' she said simply, after the first brief statements had been made, 'Hyppolyth knew everything ; he was in the secret—I am so glad.' Anthony and mother talked long and low of many things (always harking back to the chief issue, for are not death and life insolubly mixed together ?) while the snow fell blindly outside and the wind whispered in the eaves of the old house. The old house kept watch that night, the eve of an old man's burial. 'Another to leave us,' whispered the old house in awed solemnity. 'Look, there are candles lit in one room, and the candles shine on masses of beautiful flowers—funeral wreaths, they call them. . . .'

In the dim old saloon mother and Anthony sat on the great sofa and talked. At length mother rose, struck a match and lit the table-lamp in front of her ; the light revealed her face, marked by tears, yet perfectly peaceful.

I went across the room and put my arms around her. She drew me down on the sofa between herself and Anthony. She said many things which I think both Anthony and I will always remember. Sympathy is not as cheap as a cart-load of sand in the desert, and when you do come across the genuine article it is heavenly !

Mother is a born matchmaker ; age never limits her vision. She has frequently married Vera's oldest baby (aged three) to some blue-eyed baby boy or other belonging to a dear friend's child.

' Yet, I never thought of you, Anthony,' she said, half expecting to get a richly deserved scolding for her short-sightedness.

' Jane is a dear girl.'

' A darling,' said Anthony.

' You must come over every summer and see me.'

' Every summer.'

' Every summer,' echoed Anthony. He was ready to promise anything ; he is an entirely devoted and grateful lover. I think he feels he is robbing Anna Nicolajevna and he wants to be generous and make her good return.

' And we will keep a room specially for you at the Manor House.'

Anna Nicolajevna smiled. ' I have always wanted to travel,' she admitted.

' You have never left Russja-Kaja for twenty years,' said I.

' Twenty years—is it twenty years ? ' she asked.

' Time does not count at Russja-Kaja. It is a fact,' said Anthony. And then we spoke of uncle Hyppolyth, not sorrowfully, but gladly. ' He was very fond of you, Anthony,' said mother.

' Thank you,' said Anthony simply.

The circle of light from the little lamp did not stretch very far ; the greater part of the room was left in darkness. Who may not walk on the screened side of life within touch of our thoughts ? I think the same idea struck us all there ; we fell upon silence and found it satisfying.

Dear uncle Hyppolyth, he loved us all, including uncle Dimitri. It was uncle Dimitri who held the funeral oration

at the dinner which followed, by time-honoured custom, the burying of our dear one. And a fine speech it was too, ringing with spontaneity and affection. Tante Sonja did not take the trouble to conceal her tears, which flowed down her wrinkled cheeks when uncle Dimitri solemnly raised his glass ‘in memory of my very dear friend,’ and looked across the long table to the one empty seat, and bowed his head ; there was nothing theatrical about his movement, it was just as it should be, the natural action of a simple heart, a heart rather torn at that moment by horrible distress. He had aged, had uncle Dimitri ; in spite of the flare of the white candles he looked old. The Major showed his feelings by nodding his head at regular intervals, saying nothing, and unconsciously stuffing his pockets with the funeral sweetmeats placed in a great silver dish in front of him ; they were very handsome sweets, wrapped in black-edged paper, tied with crape, and furnished with a suitable device or verses—for all that poor eating. There is something incongruous in a pink caramel folded in black crape.

Sorrow is so unreal to young people. I expect we have to get on in life before we can properly grasp her honourable teaching. I did not understand uncle Hyppolyth’s funeral banquet. Why were we feasting when he was left out in the cold ? It was a travesty, a tragedy fast degenerating into a monstrous farce. One of our neighbours, stout of figure, was turning purple in the face. Someone trapped a laugh with difficulty. ‘Your health, my brother,’ said the delinquent gravely, to hide his confusion. The room grew stifling and the wines flowed freely.

‘I hate death, I hate it !’ I whispered fiercely to Anthony, who had his place next to me. He took my meaning in very proper spirit. The dinner had no charm for him, he ate little and he drank less. Anna Nicolajevna, with true

hospitality, remarked his want of appetite. ‘ You must eat something,’ she said ; ‘ try a little of this game, it is excellent.’ ‘ Anna Nicolajevna,’ said the stout gentleman, ‘ your cook is a treasure ! ’ Anna Nicolajevna beamed, and heaped the stout gentleman’s plate with preserved cubes of vegetable marrow, a speciality of the cook’s. Mother is very old-fashioned.

So the sad day came to an end. More eating and more drinking in the saloon ; relays of spiced refreshments, trays of hot tea and fanciful cakes (not in mourning). Flare of lights below, in the courtyard ; the neighing of impatient horses, the massed music of many sleigh-bells, the stamping of well-booted feet, and our guests took their leave with profound solemnity. Boris locked the great hall door and extinguished the lights.

‘ Good night,’ said mother. ‘ Oh, but I am tired.’ She linked her arm in Vera’s. ‘ Come, child, I am going straight to bed.’ They passed slowly up the stairs. We heard mother yawn, and, presently, Vera’s admonishing voice : ‘ Don’t, mother dearest, you must not cry, it is so bad for you.’

‘ We can never replace him, never—so good, so bright, so patient.’

‘ Yes, yes,’ said Vera, ‘ but do take care of yourself.’

A stifled sob. ‘ I won’t cry, darling’ (a pause). Then mother’s voice again, full of sharp anxiety : ‘ Vera, did you notice that the joint was burnt ? ’

The days passed swiftly enough, Christmas came and went, giving place to the New Year. We went on Christmas Day to our little church for the midnight service, and lighted our candles and said aloud, ‘ Christ is born,’ exactly a fortnight after Anthony’s people had heard the same thing announced from the pulpit. We may lay behind in a good many things in Russia, yet, taking it

all round, it is an excellent place to live in. There are many kind hearts abroad, many sheep, and one or two illuminative shepherds who toil for the good of the flock, and who, more often than not, get murdered for their trouble. Politics have never appreciably stirred the atmosphere of Russja-Kaja. ‘The lotus blossom on the smooth lake,’ as Anthony once likened our marvellously detached existence. ‘You put to flight all existing theories of consolidated interest, the atom which moves the universe, the pivot——’ ‘Don’t,’ said one of us; ‘we can’t follow.’ ‘And we don’t want to,’ said another. ‘Anna Nicolajevna, it is a rotten theory, this selfishness,’ said Anthony.

‘No, it is not,’ she answered sweetly, ‘it is a beautiful thing to leave your neighbours alone.’

‘Your country may fall to pieces. . . .’

‘The Daraskoffs have always unsheathed their swords in the service of their Empire.’ Mother spoke as a book. ‘God be praised,’ she added, somewhat spoiling the effect of the previous remark, ‘the family has never produced a statesman, and the boys take after me.’ Mother has a poor opinion of her own brains, and never was an opinion based on less reason.

When February bloomed and the days lengthened and the sun rose at cockcrow, and the ice was in perfect condition—three yards deep in some places and safe skating everywhere—there was a mighty stir going on in the old mansion.

Mademoiselle Cleo, comfortably installed in an unbearably heated workroom, was busy cutting out and making to her complete satisfaction modish travelling gowns and evening dresses, and last, but not least, a coat to the ground of tamarind yellow silk, which was not mourning, but an excellent piece of silk ‘laid by until wanted.’ Up in the blessed lumber-loft

there is a fine store of quite impossible odds and ends waiting for their opportunity. Anna Nicolajevna remembered in triumph the tamarind silk. Mademoiselle Cleo fastened on it : '*C'est magnifique, Madame, quelle couleur, quelle qualité !*' Anna Nicolajevna added out of her generosity a collar of black fox, and the completed garment was a joy to behold, even if it was a trifle elderly for a young girl starting on her first journey abroad.

That is why there is such a stir in the old house, and why the ancient post-bag is swollen out of all recognition ; there is so much to order, so much to think of. Uncle Dimitri is almost more excited than I am ; he is continually speaking of Napoleon's tomb and teasing us about the lady he is going to kiss in Paris. 'Poor man,' says Anna Nicolajevna, 'don't you know there is nothing so disappointing as to realise your dearest wish ? Dreams are lovely, facts are harsh !'

'In the face of love's young dream,' said uncle Dimitri, pinching my ear (he does it very gently), 'it is rank heresy to talk in such an unchristian spirit. Jane, according to your mother, you have got to put off your wedding indefinitely.'

'As if there were any comparison,' said Anna Nicolajevna, 'between the two !'

'None at all, sir,' said Anthony, 'a kiss is a kiss, and a wedding is a wedding. You don't intend to offer marriage to the lady ?'

'That depends on her appearance and if she will have me,' said uncle Dimitri.

Of course, I and uncle Dimitri could not travel alone, even Anthony agrees to that. The most awful things would happen to us, we would be robbed and cheated and murdered and never heard of again.

'Come, now,' says uncle Dimitri, 'you are pulling the

long bow. I have marched my men through fire and water and only lost fifty legs per thousand.'

'Twenty-five dead men, sir?' says Anthony.

'No, sir, ten dead men and thirty cripples.'

'A record, sir.'

The excitement of it all is very pleasing. To satisfy Anna Nicolajevna, Olga and Paul are going to take charge of 'her dear fools.' Olga has written reams about the matter. As far as Petersburg I and uncle Dimitri are to be trusted alone. And Anthony has implored us to send him a telegram from every station we pass. He has got to return to England next week. We are first going to Paris, then on to London, and finally to pay Anthony's people a visit. There was some talk of Anna Nicolajevna joining the party; from the very first she was averse to the idea of such radical business. 'No, darlings, my place is at home.' In some occult manner she signalled towards tante Katja, sitting erect on the sofa. 'Hein! am I not right? And the little ones' (two strapping twins, if you please) 'and Jacques' delicate chest, and the estate, think of the estate!' The last clause was final and unanswerable. How could Russja-Kaja get on, deprived of mother's extravagance? Anthony allowed this gravely enough, but with a twinkle in his eye. He does love mother's economy. For the matter of that he loves us all, and I am not a bit jealous.

Anna Nicolajevna excused Anthony taking a hand at the whist table on his last evening at Russja-Kaja. 'You would rather talk to Jane,' she said magnanimously. Anthony has been in the habit of lately looking after uncle Hyppolyth's cards. On this occasion uncle Dimitri played dummy, and all the luck was with the giant. We watched the game for a while, until mother waved her jewelled fingers at us. 'Go away, and don't disturb us, there is a fire in the sitting-room,' she said. 'Hearts,' declared

tante Katja, looking frightened. Anna Nicolajevna said nothing, but she shifted the heavy silver candlesticks on the card table with a bang. Uncle Dimitri smiled and turned up his dummy hand.

The fire was burning brightly in Countess Sylvia's own sitting-room, and the flames were reflected across the portrait of the English girl who had given her life into the keeping of my great-great-grandfather.

'History is only repeating itself,' said Anthony.

Outside the snow lay heavily on the ground, and it was bitterly cold. When Count Serge Daraskoff courted our great-great-grandmother, June was ripening the wall fruit in the sheltered Manor garden, and the Canterbury bells were bursting into flower around the old sundial.

'A little faith and some imagination, and the years melt into nothing,' said Anthony. 'Surely it was yesteryear when our Sylvia tripped on her high-heeled shoes through the pleasant English garden to meet her lover by the postern-gate ?'

I am afraid presently we did not talk at all of Sylvia, in spite of her charming face smiling at us across the room. Anthony drew up a big chair in front of the fire, and took me on his knees, and held me very close. The old clock ticked on the wall. 'Make the most of youth,' said the old clock, 'make the most of love !'

THE END

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